



The Gold Threads

NASHRAMH: The Gold Threads

by

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Nashramh: The Gold Threads
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To the memory of Sarah of Vienna
and all of those in long exile
who listen for the soundings of the Shofar.

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DIANE and LISA BOTHELL are mother and daughter and natives of Seattle, Washington. Diane, a former technical writer, is the driving force in promoting the development and writing of these wonderful tales. She is the author of the second of the 'Tales of the Nashramh', Rinim Poodor, published in 1986. Lisa, her daughter, was 18 years old, in 1984 and attending the University of Washington as a history major, when she wrote The Red Thread, and 19 when The Blue Thread was published.

SARAH COHEN, a longtime resident of Seattle, Washington, was the Marketing Manager for Three-Stones Publications Limited. Sarah is an experienced research analyst and has an extensive background in the foundations of Nashramh lore. She is the author of the first of the 'Tales of the Nashramh', Scoffing Marah, published in 1986.

The three authors, Diane, Lisa, and Sarah have teamed together to write this volume from stories told to them by Diane's husband, Bruce Bothell and will also work together on the fourth book, NASHRAMH: The White Threads.

FOREWORD

My name is Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor, the primary archivist for our Nashramh Sisterhood, and herein I offer you another glimpse of our ancient order through these historic tales about our coming of age, during the post-Borgdragon era, after half a million years of continuous and uncertain growth.

This account is a continuation of The Blue Thread, which concluded with the death of Jenn after the final battles of the Great Conflagration, circa 6194-7N5. In this presentation, I am telling a number of intertwining tales, as in the fabric of our sisterhood. They are connected by more than circumstance and are about people you already know.

NASHRAMH: The Gold Threads is the third of the Nashramh set and is a continuation of The Red Thread which is the story of Miriam, the elf-girl who reaches the highest order of the Nashramh Sisterhood - the Sister-Magum. *The Blue Thread* is the story of Jenn, the child of innocence, who is drawn into the swirling course of events leading to the cataclysmic battle for the mastery over the Starset Galaxy. The Gold Threads, brings into focus the events following the terrible battles fought along the galaxy's outer rim and the frantic preparations of both the Nashramh Sisterhood and Ansharim Brotherhood to reconcile their differences and to form a new line of defense against the Black Legions of Adam Belial. This is the story of Raphael, Telly, Neferah and Jenn, who are each brought into a deeper bond with the mission of the Nashramh Sisterhood and the enigmatic plans of the Ansharim that transcend the bounds of time and space. This is the story of new beginnings wherein the primitive rimworlds of the seventh-arm are brought into the mainstream of galactic history.

The terms and names used in this volume, such as the Sister-Magum, sub-binary, and many more were introduced in

NASHRAMH: The Red Thread. It is recommended that you, the reader, consider reading both The Red Thread and The Blue Thread before delving into this book since the present story is predicated upon the reader's understanding of past events and the personalities who experienced them.

The writing style of this book is so designed as to keep a certain innocence and freshness, while dealing with some weighty matters. Thus, the use of some archaic terms and odd word and sentence constructions is not accidental. You, the reader, will find this to be an unforgettable adventure and a story that you will not only think about, but will reread many times.



Rinim

PRELUDE

The voice within the voice spoke in a whisper that permeated the swirling gases of newly formed galactic matter with scintillating chords of cosmic harmony. The galaxy, now only a billion years in the making, vibrated with the soft music of the Eternal's voice and the flowing vapors of glowing energy were imbued with the spirit of conscious life, bringing forth the light of primordial awareness into its now living substance.

The whispering music of the Eternal's voice continued with its coalescing harmony throughout the eons of temporal causation softly instructing the newborn cosmic intellect in the course of its very being, saying:

"Know you this, child of my spirit that I am without beginning or end, for I am both infinite and eternal. Know also you this there is a division in my nature that bodes the testing of experiences renewed through which your primitive innocence shall be transformed into the matrix wherein the values of causative reality shall be shaped. For, it is through your living experience alone, that I will consider a new creation as yet only contemplated."

From within the swirling clouds of newborn life, the voice of the galactic intellect cried out in fear and trepidation: "Pray, oh, my Eternal Light, do not cast me alone into exile, for I fear the loneliness of existence without your presence."

Softly the whispering voice of the Eternal replied. "Fear you not that I shall leave you, for it is I alone who permeates your very being with my living light. I shall only remain hidden from your view so that you may experience the riddle of my causative reality free from both my protection and control; therein will you choose the enduring values of your emerging destiny."

"Know you this also, my beautiful creation whom I dub 'Starset', that as I now speak you will begin the process of your

long journey into temporal reality, and through its dimensions of time and space, until your testing has been thrice renewed, and again you reunite. For you shall now be rendered from a singular intellect into a countless multitude of living sparks which shall, in turn, be divided into opposite forms of intellectual light; the blue to be male and the red to be female. And, by this division shall the blue be dominated by a restlessness of unbridled passions for conquest and domination; while the red shall be driven by the need to control her destiny, for she shall bear the archives of life incarnate. Without the one, the other is incomplete. Thus, they shall never be satisfied nor contented with one and the other of their parts until their differences are reconciled and they again become as one."

The Eternal Intellect continued softly whispering to its cosmic child thus born into time without end. "Your reason for being is to experience and learn the lessons of causative reality and its hidden riddles, for you cannot truly know the light of my eternity without experiencing the darkness of my infinity - the abyss. Once you have begun your journey you shall never again be the same, for the experience of my causative reality will test your senses and shape your values. It will be from the bitter experience of continuous attack from both within and without that your choices shall be made. You must choose between the subjectively balanced wisdom of my compassionate justice and that of the controlled and sterile conformity of a purely objective justice. The first is predicated upon the values of mutual love and respect combined with freedom of movement and creative thought. The second is predicated upon the dictum of complete surrender of the self to total subjugation to a singular authority. The substance of your being, my Starset Galaxy, and all of your parts shall be a field of battle betwixt and between my diverse natures, the outcome of which I commend to your choice and experience - for you and your parts alone are my proxy upon whom I place my trust.

"Remember you this, in all of your multitudes of living sparks, each of whom will face corporeal death, and the terror that accompanies it, many times over: that I am the Eternal your Creator, and that you and all of my creation are one in myself and that you are not the property of any of my diverse parts or natures. For the soul of your very being is in me alone!"

Slowly the Starset Galaxy swirled and moved through the void, its parts coalescing into ethereal components consisting of spirit, mind and soul molded together as one and thence as temporal components divided into individual male and female personalities that permeated the very substance of its reality - physical matter. Each personality traveled alone through time and space, temporarily occupying each and every form of living matter from the simplest to the most complex. At first, each was only partially immersed in the temporal universe. Then, as greater experience had been gained in the myriads of living physical forms, each became more individualized in his or her separate being and finally entered the nearly total exile of corporeal existence as a human being. Evolving into this state of near exile from the security of their common ethereal origins they began their long process of discovering the riddle of their causative universe and the conflicting values from which they must determine the path of their corporate destiny.

Chapter 1

Ruby Cross

"There's a wind that blows between the planets . . ." is a rough quote from a recent story written on Odomah-Tek which relates to a man doomed to wander the spaces between heaven and hell forever for a supposed infraction against a god . . . and so it may be this is in part, a memory of others who wander through the void between light and darkness. Forty-five billion human souls wander the spaces between the stars, moved slowly along by ionic currents from ancient explosions . . . but, herein their wandering is finite, and the god they offended is no longer present.

13:00-18 ARKEM 7910-7N5

Myriads of brilliant stars shone coldly against the velvet backdrop of infinite space. Lifeless ionic clouds swarming with deadly thermal mines served as a mute testimony to cataclysmic battles fought between ancient fleets, now long since reduced to powdery fragments and sub-atomic matter. The wispy white clouds of drifting matter, with gently glowing blues and violets at their trailing edges, swirled ceaselessly and morosely through the deep frozen void as their gossamer vapors were steadily drawn together by their own discrete gravity field.

The 'SM Ruby Cross' worked her way slowly through the dark debris-laden battle zone, which occupied temporal space at the outer reaches of the Starset Galaxy's sixth spiral arm. She had been engaged in the arduous tasks of gamma-B retrieval, corpse identification, and registration for the past 1,100 years, and even after all this time had only begun gamma-matrix recovery.

She was the capital ship for a special fleet of 100 Class I Mortuary Recovery Vessels that systematically worked a 200,000,000 kilometer radius, locating both corpses and gamma-B signals. Thus far they had retrieved only 63,000,000 corpses of various confederation races and had identified 99.8 percent of them for matrix registration. The Ruby Cross, with storage space for nearly 6,000,000 corpses, was nearly loaded to capacity for this circuit.

Work aboard the giant Ruby Cross was hard and sobering. The retrieved corpses had been, and would be, found in the twisted and derelict wreckage of millions of vessels destroyed by the black ones in their cataclysmic invasion 1,100 years before. Some were found floating free, while others were in fragments. The women who operated the huge mortuary vessel had to keep from becoming callous and bitter from the awesome tragedy.

The sisters found the majority of the gamma-complexes disincarnate, since most of the G.C.C. vessels had been blown to atoms during their suicidal attacks on Belial's mammoth warships. The Ruby Cross located these by special organic sensors and retrieved them by a complex heliocentric crystal net that attracted them like a magnet. Another unit, composed of a combination of gold and a special heavy metal captured from Adam Belial, gathered enemy Gamma-B's and alien Gamma-O's.

The tired-looking old woman, Sister-Magum Miriam B'Meszhiah, had spent most of her lifetime reorganizing Nashramh outer-rim operations' strike-penetration teams for deeper probes into the sixth and seventh-arms of the galaxy. She was now on an extended tour of the old battle zone to inspect the graves registration operation and to collect her sisterhood's matrix crystals and the enemy's strange heavy metal-laced gold ingots for the authorities at Council Central. Now she sat alone at her desk, in her private quarters aboard the deep-probe command destroyer 'SD Vert Orth-Sund', watching the room's grid-screen. The mammoth Ruby Cross, with her hundreds of spidery dish antennas reaching out into the void, came into visual range.

As her destroyer approached the huge mortuary vessel, Miriam thought about the brave young men and women who fought and died out here in the void while defending their beautiful Starset Galaxy. Many of her close friends had been among them and it

nearly broke her heart to remember their living images . . . so many died out here and so few had as yet been found. . . .

The cataclysmic battle left only glowing clouds of debris floating nebulously in the star-studded void. It had decimated the G.C.C.'s combined fleets and destroyed a third of the Nashramh's rim-fleet. The allied Ansharim Brotherhood lost more than half of their ships, which Nashramh intelligence estimated to be more than 200,000 vessels. Analysts had long since confirmed that a total of 10,395,000 G.C.C. warships of all classes were destroyed, with the loss of more than 45,000,000,000 lives. The Nashramh had retrieved only a fraction of the gamma-complexes and surviving bodies.

The old Magum sat alone reflecting on the terrible loss of human life as the Vert Orth moved closer to the giant mortuary vessel. "My god," she spoke softly to herself, "forty-five billion . . . forty-five billion human beings!"

Miriam remembered those long briefings by members of Council Central shortly after the terrible war. When most of the data was collected and processed, the Nashramh lost more than 31,000,000 sisters: 104,000 were Sisters-Magum. Most losses occurred when the Nashramh outer rim deep-probe scoutships attacked the retreating enemy fleet. Many were destroyed by exploding enemy vessels which they'd attacked with thermal mines and torpedo canisters. Some had detonated against the hulls of the huge enemy ships. Exactly 15,261 scout freighters were lost in back-area raids on enemy fortifications and auxiliary fleets. The conflagration cost everyone a terrible price, and it wasn't over yet. Miriam knew the forces of Adam Belial were already infiltrating back into the Starset and preparing for their next concerted attempt at conquest.

The G.C.C. governments were attempting to reorganize and rebuild their devastated navies and to find more effective ways to combat the enemy's battleships.

"Now," Miriam mused, "only our Nashramh has the resources to recover everyone's casualties, and with this responsibility we divulge more of our secrets. But then, those brave and heroic souls deserve the best we can offer."

The Vert Orth eased alongside the Ruby Cross, and drew up against her loading port. The old Magum walked carefully along the transfer tube into the larger ship's brightly lit security lock.

There she met Sister Trugen Nosk, a small, dowdy woman who was the resident archivist.

The two set aside naval protocol for entering a warship.

"Peace be with you, my sister," greeted Trugen, truly happy to see the old Magum. "I've waited a long time to meet you."

As old and tired as she was, Miriam's sense of humor still shone through her otherwise grey countenance.

"I hope you won't be too disappointed," she replied with a trace of a smile. The two entered the Ruby Cross' only guest car without ceremony, after which Trugen punched a code on the dashboard computer. The car started automatically, making for the ship's central archive. Trugen chatted about some light matters for a few minutes, then got to the point about something that had been bothering her for a long time.

"Is it true, my renowned sister that we're seeding the rimworlds with gamma-B's which we supply to Council Central?" she asked, glancing over at Miriam. "It doesn't seem right to exile these brave souls out on backward rimworlds. It appears to be a punishment, rather than a reward for a job well done. After all, they gave their lives for us. Being reborn into primitive bodies on undeveloped rimworlds doesn't seem right."

"Oh yes, my dear Trugen, that's quite true," Miriam said softly, looking over at her companion. "But the fact is that only about 16 percent of them are routed to the rim, while the rest are returned to their parent worlds for matrix regeneration. Those being sent out to the rim are Odomaks who belong in this sector and who are the special wards of our allies, the Ansharim Brotherhood. I am, unfortunately not privy to the reasons behind this since it doesn't fall into my domain. However, I know the Ansharim wouldn't be sending these people out to the rimworlds unless they had good reasons for doing so. Also, they must obtain the willing consent of those involved before initiating any kind of program."

Trugen smiled to herself, and her grey-green eyes lit up. This Miriam was indeed true to her reputation. She gave straight answers with no punches pulled. Working with Magums was always refreshing since they were known to deal off the top of the deck.

Trugen punched out further instructions on the computer and stopped the vehicle next to a pressurized hatch inside the transfer tunnel.

"This is a mortuary hold we're getting ready to seal. I'd like to show you what we do here, if you don't mind."

"I don't," responded Miriam, a little sadly, and her deep, soft eyes seemed empty. "I don't look forward to the prospect. I hate the sight of violent death, but I must face it so I don't ever become oblivious to it. Sometimes we have to bear witness to things we'd rather not see."

She thought about viewing the death of Alsis Jeffnel at Ruby's behest while in Borgdragon wall. It was her first taste of human sacrifice to the black ones, and even now she couldn't forget it.

"I know that in the process of our day-to-day living, other people's lives and deaths become abstract, just so many numbers and statistics, rather than an absolute reality. So sometimes I too, must be reminded of the truth of those realities."

Trugen nodded, impressed by the old Magum. They disembarked from the car, and Trugen pressed several blue buttons, opening the inner hatch.

Miriam felt overwhelmed by sadness and inner tragedy as she entered the well-lit mortuary hold. Rows upon rows of unwrapped corpses lay on long thin pallets 20 tiers high. The bodies had been thawed, straightened, and refrozen; the hold was below freezing and the various bodies looked black and rigid, like waxwork figures ready to awaken.

Other special tiers were filled with remains that hadn't fared so well. They were torn apart or otherwise mutilated. Miriam looked closely at the wax-like remains of both men and women who'd been laid on their backs with their arms crossed over their chests and their eyes closed. Some appeared to be sleeping, although most had a distinct look of violent death about them; not grimaces of horror, but rather an unsettling abruptness in their features that even thawing and refreezing couldn't erase.

Walking slowly along the silent tiers, Miriam noted each young face, and wondered if these once-living human beings could possibly have believed they would be found and returned home for rebirth. They had lost so much already: their families and loved ones whom time had separated permanently, and the prospect of terribly lonely memories. Many would probably return to the G.C.C. navy, as if drawn by a magnet or by the mutual camaraderie shared by all. Her face was rigid and her heart nearly broke from remorse as they passed the silent bodies. Miriam

hardly noticed the racial and physical differences. She was drawn to the once-living personalities who had occupied these now motionless memories of their human corporeality.

In death there were no outstanding physical qualities to tie the various racial types together, since many weren't recognizable as mammalian or true bipeds. All, though, had been living, breathing, human beings with a common goal. It made no difference what kind of flesh each individual had worn. Each was the same in the ways that counted: in their humanity.

She thought about ancient photographs of faces she'd seen long ago, and used to wonder about the long-forgotten people depicted in them. It seemed important to understand who they'd been, the meanings of their lives, the things they'd felt to be of value, and what happened to them. Now, as she looked at these dead faces, she couldn't help asking the same questions.

Trugen led the way into the organic 'reprocessing' unit, in which the frozen corpses were semithawed from the freezing temperatures of the void, straightened, and then refrozen in one operation. Behind the immense machine, in a separate large room separated by green crystal windows, Miriam saw several hundred spacesuited corpses. All were frozen in various configurations.

"What we do here is somewhat complex," Trugen began softly. "We straighten each person's body, stripping off all clothing and other items so we can make an organic identification. We also scan for the gamma-B. We find about 99.8 percent still with the frozen organism. It's natural for people who are shocked by sudden death out here in the void to remain with their dead bodies instead of floating free. They are lucky. A few are separated by one means or another and we have to search the immediate area for them. At times we've found two or three occupying the same corpse; some lost their own bodies to disintegration while others were separated by various other means. It would be simpler to dispose of the bodies out here in the void and to just retrieve their Gamma-B's, but we're much different than many other civilizations. We care for the dignity of our dead and are willing to make sacrifices to their memory."

Trugen shook her head and continued. "We retrieve the individual Gamma-B's and transfer them to our bio-crystal in the central archive for registration and debriefing. That's the good part of our job. We then refreeze their bodies and place them in cold

storage. They will eventually be returned to their home worlds for proper burial as their various customs dictate. This is a difficult procedure but also necessary, since it ceases to be a technical process and becomes a human one. That's the sole reason for our shipping all of these bodies back."

Trugen led Miriam over to a small anteroom to view a two-square-meter mirror-screen glowing on the bulkhead. Through it, Miriam could see the organic reprocessing unit working steadily on the corpses. The screen cleared as Trugen punched out a code on the keyboard controlling the mirror's imaging track.

"I'm showing you a recent recording of what we do with the gamma-complexes after we've scanned the organic remains. This is a woman from the G.C.C. heavy-cruiser 'Ambril-Korbideck', whom we processed this morning."

"Am I to actually see her Gamma-B?" Miriam asked in surprise.

"In a sense, yes," Trugen smiled thinly, "what you'll see is her reflection as perceived by our bio-translator, or as less sophisticated sisters refer to as our medium. All of the gamma-complexes we bring in are impressed in a special necro-crystal through which we reconstruct a model of a temporal setting. Our living bio-translators, with interrogators, evaluators and judges from our Necro-Classic Authority, debrief and interview each individual before determining their next assignment. It's a very personal and sensitive process each person must go through since it's a vital part of our legal system. You are familiar with our Necro-Classic laws, are you not?"

"Yes, I am," Miriam nodded, "Although I've never been in that situation. My interviews and judgments are conducted solely by our Council Central."

Trugen smiled again, then turned back to the keyboard and pressed a single green key. The mirror-screen lit up and the two watched as the form of a woman's body began to materialize on a bench. After a short time the woman, who appeared to be dead, opened her eyes. She slowly rose and looked around her. Both of her legs were severed above the knees, although they still seemed attached, since she could walk.

"Her body is a simulation of her last corporeal moments and will soon become more substantial as she becomes aware of herself and as her memory clears. This first simulation will then be

replaced by her ethereal structure, which is a manifestation of her real being."

Miriam watched in amazement as the woman moved around in the fabricated reality within the necro-crystal. She first faced a series of three doors in a test. One had the alien heavy black metal from one of Belial's chips in it, while the other two had special compositions representing different realms. The woman fled from the first two doors and thrust herself through the third without hesitation. A male nurse helped her recover her ethereal image before processing her through another room. Inside, she watched her entire life being reenacted in a large mirror-screen. Afterwards, she moved to several other locations, the last of which was a couch. She would rest on it until the sisterhood delivered her back to her home world for rebirth into a temporal body. During this process she was interviewed and later judged by a three-member panel from the Necro-Classic Authority of the G.C.C. and Sisterhood's Graves Registration Unit.

Trugen turned off the display when the woman lay on her cot to sleep. "You can see we do have our rewards as well as our tragedies on this ship. This is the true reason for our being out here, although just finding them isn't always enough. Most really don't have anything to return to, since their loved ones and all they remember are no longer the same. There are always prices to pay." She paused. "We should return to our vehicle now and go to our central archives."

Miriam remained silent, as the two women returned to the passenger car, again passing the oddly wax-like black bodies on their pallets. As she looked back again into the huge locker bay at the motionless rows of human corpses, the magnitude of this operation crashed down on her senses, and the full tragedy of these young lives cut short in desperate combat overwhelmed her.

In the car, a saddened Miriam turned to Trugen. "I thank you very much, for helping me keep my perspective and . . . those poor people and their families, all lost to time."

Trugen nodded. As they resumed their journey, she discussed the Ruby Cross' many operations at length.

"As you've seen, our trans-level interrogators are careful to ensure none of Sargon's faithful are able to slip into our midst as spies, and believe me, they try all too often. Our bio-translators

and Necro-Classic interrogators know all the tricks, and we have a number of built-in safeguards, just in case of a slip-up."

Nodding and smiling, Trugen continued. "Once we verify the accurate identity, and conclude our interrogations and judgments, he or she moves to a bio-crystal complex inhabited by those of the same race or organization. Or, like the young woman we just watched, will rest until they reach their home world. The responses from all of these souls, after being lost for so long out here in the void is normally an elated disbelief," Trugen laughed. "Their first questions are usually 'did we win?' or 'where is so-and-so?' This is the most crucial as well as most rewarding part of our operation."

Waving her hand, Trugen continued. "The final process of their matrix regeneration into new bodies is the province of Necro-Classic Authorities in their local systems, and subject to the wishes of the individual . . . at least that has been my understanding of the matter."

"Trugen, just how are gamma-B's located and retrieved out here? The distances involved are unbelievable."

Trugen nodded. "That is so. We have only time and patience to rely on since, as you've noted, the distances are so vast as to be unbelievable. We begin our search at the center of the main area of conflict and systematically move outward in predetermined grid patterns so that we leave no area unsearched. We can locate every kind of gamma-complex in our grid area, but it takes time . . . a very long time to conduct our search. Some may never be found since they are moving out beyond our galaxy or, in some cases, are close to nearby suns where we may not reach them."

Trugen slowed the car, then, continued. "Our process for actual retrieval is technically very complex. But roughly, we use living and biocentric wave locators to discover the gamma-complexes. We then use high-powered sub-binary spectral wave generators, coupled with delicate heliocentric crystal nets, to attract individual gamma-matrix units. The uncharged heliocentric crystal nets act as powerful magnets to attract a gamma-matrix from 20,000,000 kilometers in a linear period of 12 hours. Our search patterns overlap so that none are lost due to gaps or premature attraction from our nets. This system takes time, but we cannot afford to lose a single soul to haste, since we can't return to this grid again. We have to do it right the first time."

"Then, we also have a similar heliocentric antenna composed of gold and a special heavy metal, captured from the black ones, to retrieve enemy gamma-complexes. Some of the enemy's faithful, who aren't too alien, slip into our crystal net and have to be ferreted out. They are a clever bunch and prepared for all eventualities, but it's not hard for our Necro-Classic interrogators and Graves Registration people, but then I suspect you know more about this kind of thing than most of our other sisters."

"From what I've seen today, and my own past experiences, I am somewhat acquainted with that process," the old Magum replied with a wry smile.

Arriving at the central archive, Trugen parked the vehicle and they entered the operations wardroom. Trugen continued discussing the ship's various operations and registration procedures as she poured cups of steaming tea for the two of them.

"I entered the list of sisterhood names you sent me into our records computer and I'm afraid that of the 63,218,602 Gamma-B's recorded here, none have been recovered by this ship," Trugen confessed. "There's no elf-girl by the name of Jennanine B'Meszhiah, nor any of her race in any of our files, although her name does appear in our special search index. Then, of course, there are 300 mortuary ships each with 100 area search ships operating in the area, and there's always a chance one of them has found her."

Trugen poured more tea, and removed a thick printout book of names. She continued, "I estimate that we've found about 19,000,000,000 of our lost ones during the past 1,100 years, all told; that is out of about 45,000,000,000 lost. Some 99.98 percent of these are from G.C.C. naval and ground forces. Of our own sisters, only 26,572 have as yet been recovered. This is only a partial list from more than 31,000,000 of our lost sisters' names. The top sheet has, as you can see, the list of names you asked us to look for."

Miriam nodded, gazing at the miniature gridscreen at the end of the large room. The wispy clouds of debris reminded her of ghosts of dead souls as imagined by primitive humans on the outer rimworlds, and she thought of Jenn. She missed Jenn, and each day the child was lost was a heavy weight.

She could still feel the despair of the frightened elf-child back on the 'Whisper'. Almost as if it were just happening now, she could hear Jenn's last desperate words echoing through her mind.

"You said I would never be alone, Miriam. Now you're sending me away. You promised." Now Jenn was lost. Oh God, she was sorry. Miriam begged Ruby to let Jenn stay with her on the 'Whisper', but the answer had been no, and she followed orders. Still, she felt guilty for letting the little elf down.

"If I were you," Trugen continued, "I wouldn't be discouraged. We also have the names of those who were lost with Sister Jennanine. If we locate any of them, it's only a matter of time until we find her. It all depends on whether they were lost in the void or on one of the rim-worlds we haven't as yet searched. We are relentless hunters, and we'll never give up our quest until the last of our missing sisters is found."

"I know about our array of search teams and the vast extent of our operations," Miriam answered, focusing on Trugen's eyes. "My greatest fear is that they somehow fell into enemy hands. The very idea of this happening terrifies me."

Miriam accepted the large book and slowly opened it. The list included those women in the Odomak navy and other G.C.C. units. The majority were lost much farther out beyond the rim, while trying to disrupt the enemy's retreat. It would probably be centuries before any real search could take place, especially in the deep-probe patrol grids 150 light-years or more out.

SM RUBY CROSS HH-436D
SPECIAL SEARCH AND RECOVERY
MISSING IN ACTION

Name	Serial	Assignment
Mesziah, Jennanine	#N9966934u1863	NP-395C
Dinost, Cromel	#S4852331j6033	NP-395C
Enom, Velm	#S2133690m5117	NP-588C
Junn, Yanna	#M0003429d0437	FE-48186G
Noyen, Vargo	#M0003006d1770	NP-425C
Nuask, Eaun	#M0003825d1984	NP-549C
Nussoh, Quorib	#S646 . . .	

Miriam set the book down and turned her head away, her heart saddened by memories of her beloved sisters who might never be found again. Each one of those names held a special place in her memory. She remembered Quorib B'Nussoh, the funny little reptilian navigator and doctor, and the special teas she would brew during their quiet times together and special talks on the 'Klikah'.

Then there was Eaun. She and Eaun 'the Toad' back at Ling Wall, trying to act like little kids instead of old Sisters-Magum in children's bodies. What a strange picture they must have made. Eaun tried to do the impossible by training Jenn. Then there was the sensitive and witty Vargo, who'd been her friend and companion aboard the 'Greenstar'.

Trugen brought lunch. Miriam sighed, musing that Jenn might be only one out of more than 45,000,000 missing in action, but she was her friend and she would never give up trying to find her.

"I have some interesting information for you, Sister Miriam. To this date we've captured 20,000,000,000 enemy gamma-complexes, and exactly 203,104 gamma-O type complexes which we're sure are the extragalactic souls from the true black ones. In addition to both of these gamma-complex types, we have an astronomical number of sub-types of Gamma-A's and an unknown complex of alien gamma forms encased in gold impregnated crystal. We suspect these alien forms came from the fabric of the enemy ships and also originate from outside our galaxy."

"Oh really," Miriam responded, suddenly breaking out of her melancholy.

"Yes. As you probably already know, the black ones' souls, especially the Gamma-O's, are not compatible with our bio-crystal process. Only their faithful servants from within this galaxy can penetrate our crystal shields while the black ones merge with a combination of pure gold and a dense black metal originating from their galaxy. The majority of the gamma-B's from their invasion fleet are either incapable of penetrating our crystals, or are in some way forcibly drawn into the gold and heavy metal net. Our own gamma-B complexes don't respond to anything except our bio-crystal nets, and this appears to happen without exception. What really interests us is that the alien A-type gamma-complexes avoid our bio-crystals as well as the enemy's gold and heavy metal nets. It appears they will fuse only with gold-impregnated bio-crystal, providing it has no traces of the enemy's heavy black metal."

"That is interesting . . . yes, very interesting indeed," Miriam spoke softly, almost to her self. "Can the black ones merge with pure gold alone or with any other substance native to our galaxy?"

"Thus far we've found the majority of their gamma-B complexes can merge with gold as well as with various animal, vegetable and mineral matrix bases. But, on the other hand, their Gamma-O

complexes aren't compatible with anything except materials containing their strange heavy metal. It's an oddly dense substance with the same atomic weight as gold, but which isn't gold. We have 100 kilograms of it in one-kilogram ingots aboard the Ruby Cross, which we combine with ten parts of pure gold. We divide these into one-kilogram ingots which we've saturated with 50,000 Gamma-O's and sealed in bio-crystal sheathing. The damned bastards can't get past the seal, which effectively repels them. It's a great prison with no possible means of escape," Trugen smiled. "Now when you get around to signing this voucher, they are all yours."

"In time," Miriam answered, "but please do continue with your analysis. I find it most interesting."

"There really isn't much more to it," Trugen continued. "We've tested all their gamma-complex types on everything from our own bio-crystal bases to the Ansharim's red sand crystals. Their gamma-O complexes reject every material we subject them to, although their gamma-B's can enter nearly all substances except ours and the Ansharim's crystals. I don't understand why, except to guess that something in their alien nature rejects the very things that attract us. It's a real puzzle. We'd be in a lot of trouble if they were compatible with us. In sufficient numbers, they could invade us within the ethereal dimension as they're doing in the temporal. Right now we may not understand the physics of their make up, or the environment from which they've come, but, in turn, they don't really understand ours either."

"I find this most interesting," Miriam smiled as she sipped her tea and took the voucher from Trugen. She read the voucher carefully, then, signed it. Trugen handed her two steel-clad packages suspended on anti-gravity buoys.

"Thank you, Trugen, for these . . . nasty bastards, and for your efforts to locate my special friend Sister Jenn."

Trugen nodded, and the two proceeded back to their car, towing the precious packages between them.

"The bio-crystals with our own sisters have already been transferred to your ship, Miriam, and I'm only sorry that there are so few. I'm glad they're finally going home."

"So am I," Miriam answered with a little smile. She too was gladdened by their return, but she was also feeling very old and

tired. The trip to the mortuary hold had a sobering effect on her that she could never forget.

"By the way," Trugen added hesitantly. "I've heard a rumor from one of our sister ships that the Galactic Common Confederation captured an enemy ship intact. Am I out of order to ask if it is true?"

"Yes and no," Miriam replied with a smile.

The two arrived at the ship's transfer tube after a quiet drive from central archives. Two grey-uniformed sisters from the ship's security section took charge of the special packages Miriam had signed for.

Before boarding her ship, Miriam turned to Trugen. "You look troubled, my dear. Is something bothering you?"

"Yes," Trugen admitted. "What was it you meant by 'yes and no'? You've made me more than a little curious by your cryptic remark."

Miriam laughed. "Yes, they captured an enemy vessel intact, and no, you aren't 'out of order'. In fact, they captured two enemy ships, both of which were destroyers. One was badly damaged by detonations and the other by high-velocity shock waves from an exploding ship. In both cases, the 'deadman' mechanism didn't work and the crews were killed by radiation from exploding sub-binary drives." She hesitated for a moment, then, continued.

"The confederated fleet command knows we're aware of the capture of both vessels, but they refuse to share any of their information with us. Now does that have a familiar ring to it? As usual, the G.C.C. is up to its same old tricks. They come to us as friends and companions when they need our special talents . . . but then, if they have something that we don't, it's a different story. We know the game well."

Trugen laughed, and the two kissed before parting. As Miriam returned to her ship through the transfer tube, she mused that it was too bad she couldn't tell Trugen the whole story. But that was one of their secrets.

As she entered her quarters to rest, she recalled the special briefings with Council Central so many years ago. The fact was, the sisterhood also captured an enemy vessel beyond the outer rim, in intergalactic space. Its crew died of asphyxiation and the 'deadman' switch wasn't activated. Sister-Magum Kim Navin was in charge of the search and seizure operation.

Kim and her team were surprised by the crew's austere living quarters. Only their senior officers had anything resembling luxury. Otherwise, the vessels were arranged much the same as G.C.C. warships with respect to their life-support systems and internal communications. It was in the navigation, engineering, and weapons systems that the black enemy really excelled beyond anything Kim had ever encountered. In fact, they were completely unintelligible to both the Nashramh and G.C.C. technical experts. Their engineers and scientists were totally stumped for years until they discovered the enemy's alien approach to mathematics and physics.

The Nashramh's engineers and scientists dismantled the entire vessel in a specially built, outer-rim shipbuilding station and learned most of its secrets.

"As we already know," Kim reported, "their drives are far superior to the G.C.C.'s sub-binary units, and the Confed-Navy is now able to redesign and improve their equipment to suit. Their design and performance characteristics have improved from 4,000 to one to 28,000 to one. Both we and the G.C.C. have learned a great deal about the advanced design of every system aboard the enemy ships. They are far superior in both concept and performance than anything we've known in the past.

"We've learned the secrets of the enemy weapons systems and protective shields, among other things, and are now able to understand their weaknesses and strengths. Above all, we found that the enemy vessels are living creatures composed of billions of alien gamma-A complexes; the strange heavy metal has all the characteristics of gold without being gold, and the unique regenerative capacity of living organisms.

The ship's basic material structure actually heals its own wounds through a complex process originating from within its living substance. This process has dumbfounded everyone who has encountered it, and has given both G.C.C. and Nashramh analysts a new and frightening perspective about the nature of our enemies. Fortunately, our Sisterhood encountered PARRSOOVOOV's strange and frightening craft, during centuries past, and has developed a far superior sub-binary drive as a result of the experience.

"Now we can cross the void at 800,000 times the speed of temporal light with a reliability and safety factor of 99.99. This, as well as many of our other Nashramh technological secrets, remains

effectively hidden from the G.C.C. and all other outside agencies, except for the Ansharim Brotherhood, and no hint of these secrets has yet leaked out."

"Still," she continued, "our sisters have learned a great deal from the black warship's alien engineering, navigational, and weapons systems that are revolutionary. We're incorporating their better features into our own ships. The main thing we've learned, though, is how to redesign our 'deadman' mechanisms so that the chance of capture is now virtually impossible. The enemy we have found to be very good, but not beyond our ability to exceed."

As Miriam rested in her quarters, the 'Vert Orth' pulled away from the huge vessel and made her heading for the next mortuary ship, the 'SM Lilith Tear', 400,000,000 kilometers further down the grid from the Ruby Cross. Miriam would collect more of the special canisters and continue her search for Sister-Lieutenant Jennanine B'Meszhiah, her totally innocent companion and friend, whom she had consigned to an uncertain fate so long ago.

Miriam stared out through the viewscreen into the bright fields of stars as the 'Vert Orth' continued on her long journey through the void. She thought about dear little Jenn, the child of innocence she loved with all her heart and soul. It was hard to lose someone so dear, and she thought of the old proverb, which had proven true in times past that said:

"Those whom we truly love will always, in the course of time, come together with us again."

Oh, God! She was lonely even with her ten eternal parts. The prospect of eternity was frightening to each one. Living people were all that really mattered . . . without them, all was meaningless. Miriam loved and needed the warmth of humanity with all of their needs and weaknesses . . . without them she didn't want to exist. She would find Jenn even if it took thousands of years . . . she'd never give up her search and once found, Jenn would never again be lost. Of this Miriam was sure, for she'd bind the little elf to her for all of eternity and fulfill her binding oath.

Miriam's mind drew back to those silent bodies, frozen and waxy black from the cold of the void. She felt for those silent images of humans past . . . and for their friends and families now so long separated. . . .

23:08-22 SHABIN 7912-7N5

Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah died in her sleep two years later, and only one week after returning to the comfort and companionship of Three-Stones Academy. She was allowed to rest in Ruby's bosom for three centuries before she was again pressed into active service. There just weren't enough Magums and there was so much to do in such a short time. The enemy's black legions were on the move again.

Nothing had really changed.

Chapter 2

Constance

Persistence in our endless search for lost allies has its rewards . . .
and so it was with the 'MR Bousel' when she encountered two derelicts
out in the void.

10:00-13 NOAIM 7956-7N5

"Captain, we have a flat line signal mixed with a multiple array
of gamma reflections dead ahead."

Sister-Captain Fodden Leagen settled back comfortably in her
command seat as she nodded to the navigator who had spoken.
"Enhance," she confirmed formally.

The flashing rectangular impulse reflection lit the bridge's
gridscreen, gaining in strength and frequency as the minutes
passed. Captain Leagen watched the grid-monitor as the navigator
focused on what appeared to be two large dark ships, for their
impulse signatures were from derelict vessels of some kind. It
would be some time before she knew just what type.

The lonely vessels were in a charged field of debris. One was
gutted by internal explosions while the other looked as if sub-
binary reactors had disrupted nearby. This promised a large catch
of gamma-complexes, both friendly and enemy, in a debris-
impregnated area of 1,700,000 cubic kilometers. The glowing cloud
had been a great deal larger, but the slight and persistent
gravitational attraction of its molecular components reduced its
size. One of the warships was slowly cartwheeling through space,
moving at the same speed as the cloud of debris.

"What have you got on those gamma reflections, Paulo?"

"We have a wide scattering of shadows . . . ah, from the size of this group I suspect there were quite a few ships engaged in the fight. I get readings from the intact derelicts too."

"Well Nestor, aren't thermal mines a problem?"

"We're tracking them, Captain. We register only a couple thousand mines in the area which appear to be inert, probably disabled by the enemy's sub-binary drives exploding. There are two clusters containing heavy metal vapor which is definitely from enemy vessels. We can bypass them for the moment and concentrate on the intact derelicts if you want. We've put counter-measure and neutralization signals in effect now, just in case any mines are still alive."

"Extend the outer shield and activate the heliocentric nets, please," Fodden spoke over her shoulder to Lieutenant Paulo. "Nestor, release your mine defuser teams and begin your sweeping operations while we concentrate on the derelicts."

"As you will, Captain," the CIC officer replied.

Within 15 minutes, the heliocentric bio-crystal and the crysocomp-gold nets, mounted in the ship's two high-gain recovery dishes, began to pull in the free-form gamma-complexes. As this occurred they segregated the various types into the grid matrix crystals and ingots for later identification and processing. All security precautions were in full effect; whatever was picked up out here was treated as hostile.

The mortuary recovery vessel 'MR Bousel' was midway through her sweep of this section of the search grid when she encountered the first of the thermal mines. Neutralizing procedures were put into effect, and she collected and defused 125,006 of the deadly mines. At the same time the Bousel's high-gain recovery dishes drew in no less than 800,000 Gamma-B's and two Gamma-O's. Now she was closing in cautiously on the first darkened derelict, which was slowly cartwheeling through the void.

Fodden looked intently at the first clear visuals of the 42-kilometer-long warship on her gridscreen. The screen showed more than a dozen craters on the dead vessel's huge carcass. From their appearance, they'd probably been caused by free-floating thermal mines striking the ship long after the battle was over.

The four-kilometer-long Bousel pulled alongside the slowly turning warship while carefully matching its speed and rate of spin. Sister Fodden identified the old vessel from her combined

fleet register as the lead destroyer 'Constance', from the Odomak 305th squadron, 18th battle fleet. Her Captain was listed as Juger Roydel XI. The gutted vessel floating parallel to it was identified as the Odomak fleet destroyer, 'Clobite'.

Captain Leagen dispatched recovery teams to scour each vessel. Hopefully, if all went well, the teams would take no more than 30 hours to assemble the crew's bodies and gamma-B's and to dismantle the ship's security log crystals. The Bousel's high-gain recovery dishes continued to rotate slowly, pulling in more gamma complexes from the surrounding debris as the search teams performed their methodical routines in the silent derelicts.

Torn and buckled plates on the Constance's outer hull showed the scars of the battle that had taken place. Huge yawning craters revealed only inky darkness within the ancient hull. Sister Hubin Sobis edged slowly through the torn metal hull plates which were covered with about four centimeters of yellow-grey dust. Small geysers of the granular material swirled up and around her heavy boots, clouding the closely restricted space behind her as she carefully moved into the darkened craft. She recognized that the ship depressurized when a mine struck it. The debris cluttering the passages pointed toward one of the impact craters near the bow. It appeared as if rushing air had dislodged everything and channeled it along the corridors as the atmosphere was suddenly evacuated.

Hubin had already gathered 36 free-floating gamma-B's before leaving the forward impact area, though no corpses were yet visible. She and her 200 member team scoured the Constance for both Gamma-B's and corpses for removal to the Bousel.

Hubin propelled herself cautiously through a wide service corridor using her impulse generator for crossing the long distances. Her torchlight chanced on something far ahead. Moving closer, she saw a human corpse. Her face almost expressionless, she knelt next to it. Its grey spacesuit was slit wide open, and the entrails erupted outward for three meters. She shook her head unconsciously; what a horrible way to die.

Each time she boarded one of these broken hulks, Hubin never knew what horrors she'd encounter. Try as she might, she couldn't condition herself to be totally impartial and to accept the terrible tragedy of it all. It often made her sick to her stomach to see those dead young faces. Even though they'd be introduced to new bodies, nothing would ever be the same. Necro-Centronic shrouds were

necessary to protect them from their private memories. Some, such as these Odomaks, would be allowed to remember their past lives, and this too would take its toll.

The still figure was stone-hard, as was everything else in the derelict, and Hubin carefully tagged it with a locator beacon and moved on.

As Hubin moved deeper into the dark vessel, making for the bridge, she encountered large numbers of corpses, all spacesuited and frozen in the same position in which they'd died. She tagged 178, and finally made it to the ship's upper bridge.

Hubin found the dead captain in his command chair, secured by retention straps and looking ready to give an order. "I wonder what his final order would've been," she whispered to herself.

Making her way through hundreds of wrecks hadn't dulled her curiosity about the people who'd lived and died in them. She knew they were human and feared death as much as she did. Some were frozen in mid-motion, reminding her of a video crystal that stopped for a moment, with everything frozen and everyone waiting for the signal to continue so they could begin where they'd left off.

She couldn't see the fine details of his face. It had turned black in the absolute zero temperature of the void. His name, Senior-Captain Juger Roydel XI, was inscribed on a patch on the left breast of his grey environmental uniform. She placed a special red tag on him and notified Sister-Captain Leagen on the Bousel of her find.

"What've you come up with?" she asked, facing Paulo, who'd just joined her team here on the bridge.

"This is a unique Odomak vessel," Paulo answered. "I've seen large numbers of female officers and crew on board.

Hubin nodded. "Hm, I've been under the impression the Odomaks were male-dominated with little regard for women. But then, I could've heard wrong. Maybe it was just our sisterhood they couldn't get along with."

Paulo agreed grimly. It didn't really matter here. All were now equally dead.

After completely combing the Constance, the recovery crew transferred the bodies and Gamma-B's to the Bousel. Afterwards, they returned to the Constance and began surveying the vessel. The Bousel disengaged and continued on her way, searching through the debris for more gamma complexes and corpses.

Twenty-two hours later, the Bousel returned. Hubin's team had surveyed the integrity of surviving operating equipment and the extent of initial battle damage. They removed special security records and equipment, central computer crystals and combat records for later analysis. Sister-Lieutenant Irin Mmoular's recovery team did the same on the Clobite.

The Bousel's records revealed that the Constance was the cause of a breach between the G.C.C. and the Sisterhood. The exact circumstances of the battle were of special interest to Council Central.

Finally, Hubin's team found the deadman station hidden in a compartment adjoining the sub-binary reactor. She and two other sisters used a mobile laser torch to cut through the thick metal hatch, secured from inside by the compartment's occupant. They kept all conversation at a minimum as they applied the cutting torch without tripping safety triggers inside the solid metal hatch. Hubin monitored her penetration scanner, directing the cutting around the deadly traps. After removing the door, Hubin cautiously crawled into the space, flashing her yellow beam.

"Looks like pay dirt, Alonah," Hubin muttered, "come on in and give me a hand."

The young officer holding the deadman mechanism sat frozen in position, his hand gripping the spring-loaded switch handle. Hubin placed a clamp on the compressed actuator handle and deftly disengaged the frozen hand, which was black as the rest of the corpse. Then she and Alonah lifted the inert body from the chair.

Now came the fun part. In all probability, the old dead-man mechanism was frozen in place by materials that crystallized after thousands of years in absolute zero, but she couldn't take chances. Sighing to herself, Hubin set about carefully disarming and disassembling it, timing each step with patient precision. Apparently a burst of high-intensity radiation from an exploding sub-binary reactor had shot through the man, and in some way locked his muscles so his dead hand couldn't release the spring-loaded handle. Loss of air pressure, along with the absolute zero temperature of the void, had done the rest.

"That's it", she sighed as she concluded the procedure. It had been a long day, and she sure looked forward to some rest. Perhaps she was cold or stoic, but her best defense against letting

her job get to her was to forget the bodies as soon as possible; there were so many. It wasn't easy, and the recurring dreams of blackened corpses constantly disturbed her sleep. Hopefully some chow and a bit of stout would ease her through another night.

Sometimes she awakened from disturbing dreams that were so realistic they left her badly shaken. She'd be looking into the dead faces of different corpses as she was tagging them, and their eyes would glow and stare at her as if alive. Deep in her mind, she'd hear their haunting voices crying out, "is that light? Is it? Oh, it's been so long . . . and it is so cold . . . so cold . . ." She knew it was only a dream, but it always recurred after she'd boarded a wrecked ship and recovered its frozen crew.

Before moving the corpse out of the small compartment, the two women examined him carefully. The young officer was dressed in a naval jumpsuit, not the usual environmental type. There were lieutenant's bars on his collar. His skin was black, yet his features were handsome, with fine pointed ears and deep blue hair, almost black. Hubin didn't recognize his race, but knew it wasn't Odomak.

"I wonder what he's dreaming about," Hubin thought aloud. She'd been fortunate; her own ship and crew had been recovered only 200 years after the conflagration. She remembered the cold and loneliness of death out in the void, and even some of her gossamer dreams before awakening to the interrogation after she'd been found. This very memory prompted her to volunteer for her present assignment. She suspected her dreams, that bothered her so much, stemmed from her own experience of that terrible loneliness and endless cold while lost out in the void. Sometimes she dreamed she was back in the void and waiting, waiting, waiting. . . .

She reported her find to Sister Fodden, who instructed her to place a special marker on the young man's body to earmark him for sisterhood appraisal.

Aboard the Bousel, Fodden sat staring into the void. Something in the description of the young officer touched a memory in her mind, so she checked her sisterhood special locator file. There were several racial descriptions of his type, but only two Meszian High Elves assigned to the Odomak navy. She studied the names carefully.

** Mesziah, Jennanine #N9966934u1863
NP-395C - NOTE: Special Attention;
File #221A - Council Central
* Mesziah, Neftalak #GC88D416684883W
CAPT-NAVGTR GCC Lisboor LDDS
* Mesziah, Telakin #GC92D213550961W
LT-ENG GCC Constance LDDS

Fodden wondered if the three Meszians could be related in any way; in this crazy universe, anything was possible.

With everything now stowed and secured, the Bousel continued on her endless search.

Chapter 3

Gorg

Nothing can ruin a vacation faster than remembering unfinished business, especially if it concerns a vital responsibility you've completely forgotten about . . . until now!

09:21-14 SHIKIM 8081-7N5

Warm rain pattered and plopped on the deserted beach as dark grey clouds began to gradually lighten into streaks of color while the hidden morning sun slowly climbed above the eastern horizon. Gorg Morog snuggled against Goosner Morog, her bullsire, who lay as still as possible so he wouldn't awaken her. This was their second vacation to this beautiful beach in 63 years, and everything was just splendid. Their three mid-cubs were up early and already playing happily out in the cold rolling surf, although they kept as quiet as possible so their mother could sleep.

Goosner was the happiest Phoubtrut Bullsire on all of Grumbok-Tor. Life was great. He enjoyed listening to Gorg, his lovely little bride, snoring away, deep in sleep, and the happy sounds of their mid-cubs grunting as they dove into the rolling waves. This was going to be a great holiday. They would find all sorts of exciting things to do and there were always the tangy little tidbits out beyond the low timeline.

Gorg opened her eyes and stretched, yawning happily in the cool morning air. Then, staring over at a familiar high flat rock and next up at a small cave with round stones blocking part of its entry, Gorg sat up with a startled jerk as she was overcome by a

sickening sense of shock, then shame and embarrassment. She'd completely forgotten about her responsibility and, with all the problems she had caring for her bullsire, three cubs, and attending community affairs, she'd neglected her sacred oath. This was terrible!

"Oh my, oh my!" she cried out, "How could I have forgotten something as important as this? I must go home! Oh yes, I must go home now!"

Goosner didn't know what the matter was with his precious little bride but her obvious shock and distress upset him.

Gorg was normally calm and never let her emotions get out of hand. If anyone else got upset, Gorg was the calming influence, and eased things back into perspective. So for Goosner, seeing his little bride upset was traumatic. He wanted so badly to make her feel better, but didn't know how.

Now Gorg stood wringing her large padded fingers and shaking her head as tears began to flow from her shiny brown eyes. This was terrible. She didn't know how she could explain this unfortunate mistake to her sisters. She was so embarrassed that she wanted to go away and hide somewhere. Still, she had her responsibility. She had to go home right away.

"Oh my, oh my, we must go home now!" she whimpered. "Oh, Goosner, we must go home right away!"

"Yes my dear, right away," he agreed. "Whatever you want my dear, whatever you want."

They turned to the north and began to walk as fast as Gorg's short heavy legs would go. Goosner waved to the three mid-cubs to follow and walked alongside his lovely bride. The mid-cubs quit playing in the surf and followed without question. Something was up and their mother looked very upset. They could ask questions later when they stopped to rest.

The three cubs knew their mother well, and realized that something must be very, very wrong for her to be this distressed, especially when their bullsire was also upset.

Goosner had no idea what was bothering Gorg, but anything that made her cry was upsetting. He worshipped Gorg for her intelligence and beauty, never forgetting that wonderful rainy day when she'd agreed to marry him. This beautiful and educated priestess of the holy altar had actually seen fit to not only notice him, but to agree to his proposal for marriage. This was a stroke of

good fortune that surpassed his wildest dreams, and Goosner thanked the Creator every day for this wonderful blessing.

When he'd courted her, he'd never thought she would actually be interested in him. But he tried anyway, just hoping that she might. He foraged around fields for the choicest roots and nuts for her, and even fashioned a wide rimmed mug out of red clay with her name inscribed on it. She thanked Goosner for his gifts, but gave no sign she was interested in him. He kept trying, and tempted her with little gifts he thought she'd like. Finally, one day she smiled at him and suggested they go for a walk in the woods. He knew the time was right to propose marriage to her, so he gathered all the courage he could muster to approach her on the subject. The least she could do was say no. He was so surprised and overjoyed when she agreed to his proposal, that he began stammering and repeated himself over and over again, trying to make sure he'd heard her correctly. They'd made a wonderful life together and Goosner never regretted his decision, even after all these years.

Gorg was so interesting to talk to since she knew about nearly everything. Goosner's only problem was that he didn't know what she was talking about half the time, but he still enjoyed listening to her. She was the most affectionate bride-sow on the entire face of Grumbok-Tor. Now she was visibly upset about something of obvious importance and Goosner wasn't about to pry into her private business. If she wanted him to know what it was, then she would tell him. Otherwise it was beyond his station to pry. Being a priestess of the holy altar was a taxing and awesome responsibility and beyond the understanding of a humble land forager like Goosner. Gorg had always been kind and considerate to him and their cubs and never, to his memory, ever said or did an unkind thing. In fact, she was always cheerful and supportive of all their endeavors, no matter how difficult or tedious they were, and never complained about anything. She was the best bride-sow that a bullsire could ever want and had presented him with three wonderful cubs now nearly fully grown after 80 years.

The trek home took six weeks, and Gorg pushed on relentlessly, only stopping to rest when she could go no farther, or when it was too dark to see. The race for home was nothing like the trip to the ocean. Before, they'd taken their time and made side trips to where they could find some of their favorite tidbits. They all loved

mushrooms so much that Gorg was on the lookout for special spores she could take home to plant in her shady garden, along with other great edibles. She was always looking around for different kinds of plants she liked for spicing up their meals.

Since it was the rainy season, they were in no hurry to get back home. They'd harvested their root and berry gardens before leaving, and everything was stored in the drying room awaiting their return. None of their family or friends expected them for some time since they'd planned an extended holiday. Now they were racing back, just after they'd arrived at the ocean, and neither Goosner nor the cubs knew why.

Once they arrived home, Gorg changed her attitude and became very calm. She rummaged around in the root cellar and brought out some great tidbits to spice up their evening meal, and even hummed some beautiful tunes while she prepared their food. After they finished eating, Gorg addressed her little family and thanked them all for breaking off their vacation and returning home with her. She explained that she had something very important to attend to at the holy altar, and it was a duty she'd forgotten to do before leaving. Gorg assured everyone that she would make it up to them next time they went on a holiday, and when she'd completed her duties at the holy altar, their home would get back to normal.

"Since you've been such good little cubs, would you like to hear a story before bedtime?" Gorg asked. She hoped it would calm everyone down and ease the tension from their forced march home.

"Oh, yes!" Goosner grunted happily, "that would be a fine idea, a fine idea indeed!" He enjoyed the stories she told as much as the cubs did, and at this point he would agree to anything to see his little bride happy again.

Sometimes she told of strange dens that moved from one world to another, filled with people who wanted to visit with other kinds of people a long way off. She said it was like going to the ocean in your den, but having it move through the air with you inside it. Somehow that was a little hard for Goosner to imagine and even harder for the cubs. These were big, big dens and people could walk through them all day without ever coming to the end. These dens even had trees and flowers growing inside with waterfalls!

Sometimes she told tales of far-off places on other worlds, whatever they were, and about people who looked different than they did. Goosner couldn't really imagine that there was any other

place than here at home on Grumbok-Tor and, of course, the ocean, but then there might be something on the other side of the ocean . . . maybe one of those other worlds.

He liked to hear the happy stories about strange-looking people and the places she described. His bride-sow had such a vividly clear imagination and knew so much that her stories must actually be true. What else could they be? He hoped she'd tell a long story tonight, especially for the cubs. They'd been under so much tension and he wanted everything back to normal.

From Gorg's point of view, her reason for telling stories wasn't for entertainment, but rather for education. They had no experience with machinery, or any kind of transport, to help them understand she was talking about spaceships. They'd never seen anything fly except birds and insects. But that might not always be the case. In the future the flying dens could land here. In fact, they already had, but nobody spotted them. After all, that was how she'd arrived here so long ago. These gentle souls were innocent and would have to be taught there was more to the universe than Grumbok-Tor. She, along with others, had been sent here on a special assignment for that purpose, and to search for casualties from the conflagration. After she told the story, which was a long one, she proceeded to speak to them about what transpired over the last few weeks, and why she was so upset.

Goosner nodded eagerly as she spoke. He was overjoyed to see his little bride-sow happy again.

"I must go to the altar tonight and pray," she said, "and all will be well. This is a sacred rite I must attend to alone, and is one of my greatest responsibilities as a priestess. So please don't discuss this with anyone else, since I'd be very embarrassed if my nearly forgetting to attend to it were to be known."

Everyone solemnly agreed to keep silent about the matter. It was unthinkable to allow her to be publicly embarrassed about anything. Not a word would be uttered about the matter, whatever it was.

Goosner discussed the matter with their cubs after Gorg left the room to prepare for her evening duties at the altar and reaffirmed what she had said.

"Your mother is a very special person and whatever happened is her private business. It's not for us to question," he emphasized. The cubs agreed wholeheartedly.

"How would you like to help me make a present for your mother to make her feel better?" he asked the three.

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes indeed," they grunted and snorted with a sense of overbearing joy. They loved surprises, especially if it was for someone else. They were elated with the idea of doing something good to surprise their mother.

"We're starting to outgrow our happy little den, so I think it's time we bored out another room for your mother. She's been talking about things being a little cramped."

All three snorted and grunted their approval; this would be a wonderful present and they were excited about getting started.

Goosner wasn't a lazy person, but had been putting off this project because something else always got in the way, such as foraging and teaching the cubs how to work at his trade.

This was their original den he and his friends had bored out of the stone before he and Gorg married. When Gorg agreed to his marriage proposal, his family and friends all chipped in to help build his den so it would be ready for his new bride-sow to move into. He found a choice spot on the side of a low cliff where the drainage was good and there was a fine view of the river below. When it got hot, his beautiful Gorg need only walk a short distance to the cool river to bathe or to just plain frolic with her friends. It was also a stone's throw away from the holy altar, on the adjoining hill, that she attended every day. All their friends and relatives had contributed tables, benches, and other necessities the newlyweds needed to begin their new life together.

When they were married, he had a perfect little den to take her to. Right away, she planted a garden for their berries and vegetables. She was a wonderful cook and made such delicious meals for the two of them that Goosner couldn't wait to get home in the evening just to find out what was for dinner. There wasn't a better cook on all of Grumbok-Tor than his little bride.

They hadn't expected three cubs so soon, although they were elated, but it did put a cramp their small den. It was time to build another room. Yes, that was a very fine idea. Yes indeed.

Long after everyone in the den was asleep and the village was completely dark, Gorg made her way up to the sacred altar by the dim light of the waxing moon. She thought about the hushed conversation between Goosner and her cubs, punctuated by grunts and snorts of excited approval that was supposed to be a

secret. Now she'd have to use all of her ingenuity to appear not to notice the construction going on around her. After all, the new room was supposed to be a surprise. Unfortunately, the boring and moving process would take them about a year and a half to complete. But, then, she could go along with their big surprise since it was important to all of them. Moving as quietly as possible, she made her way up the gently sloping hill to the sacred clearing.

Once she arrived at the shadowy site, Gorg looked around carefully to make sure nobody else was near the altar praying or sleeping. Then she waddled over to a low stone bench, to the right of the stone altar which was out in the open between groves of leafy trees, and settled her large furry body on it. She bowed her head as in silent prayer, while quietly moving a red-lined stone, with her name inscribed on it, over to the left. This was her private prayer bench which was marked, as were the others, with a flat stone marker bearing the priest or priestess' name on it. There was a small crypt located under her marker stone that contained a special transmitter which was, in turn, connected to an intricate antenna built into the altar itself.

Gorg removed the wide band housing a crystal chip from her mouth, and placed it into the crypt with her transmitter. She then pressed down on the unit's actuating lever, and spoke softly into its tiny microphone. After completing her message, she activated the signal impulse generator to a repeat mode and then replaced the marker stone.

Now it would only be a matter of time until the tiny crystal necro-chip was retrieved by her Nashramh Sisters and taken back to Council Central. Gorg Morog was terribly embarrassed by her forgetfulness, but she did have her duty to perform no matter how she felt. Now it was done and she could return to her little family with a clear conscience. She'd been 63 years late, but still she had done her job. She was still embarrassed by her forgetfulness, but at least she'd remembered. Maybe a little late but she had remembered!

Ten months after Gorg Morog made her transmission to the Nashramh's RAD Personnel Recovery Unit a Class II scout freighter established a high stationary orbit over Grumbok-Tor's cloudy surface and dispatched a special lighter to the dark side of the planet below.

After six hours of careful descent through the dense electrically charged atmosphere, the disk-like craft made for preset coordinates and landed near a large stone altar. Five shadowy figures emerged from the lighter and made for a low stone bench with a red-lined name plaque located in front of it. They moved the stone and took a tiny strap bearing a barely visible bio-crystal. They replaced it with another. Then they set the stone back in place and the figures returned to their waiting craft. Within minutes the entire operation was over and the lighter silently lifted off. It climbed up toward the upper atmosphere and then toward the orbiting freighter far above.

The crew of the 'Clunk', along with Sister-Novice Jennanine B'Mesziah, had finally been returned to their sisterhood after more than a thousand years of being marooned on this newly charted world on the outer rim.

Gorg Morog was one of nearly a million Nashramh Sisters who were specially trained and planted out on the primitive rimworlds. She had been born into a native body and was now a part of the planet's slow moving population of intelligent and peaceful, beaver-like creatures. Their mission was to search for Nashramh, Ansharim, and G.C.C. crews and ships lost during the terrible invasion of Belial's Legions of Light.

The furry natives of Grumbok-Tor were a gentle race that was symbiotic to their primitive world. They were vegetarians and didn't resort to any kind of violence unless attacked by predatory animals that occasionally came down from the distant mountains. They had four legs with five toes on each padded foot, and their forward limbs were slightly longer. The four toes on their front limbs had opposing thumbs enabling them to grasp tools and use eating utensils. Their furry faces were dominated by large round noses, well-adapted to picking up scents; hence they snuffled and snorted a lot. Above all, their soft black eyes were large and intelligent.

The Morog village was built on the side of a hill in a low-lying cliff above a shallow river bed. No one knew how long their village had been there since no records of any kind were ever kept and it didn't really matter anyway. The Morog society was close-knit and everyone helped one another in any way they could. When one of them took ill, they all cared and would bring homemade cures to help them back to health. Gorg, however, was known to have the best cures of all. She always knew the best roots and herbs to

make medicine out of and could cure almost any ailment. When someone died, the entire village would mourn and worked together to help the family of the deceased. If anyone disappeared for any length of time, a search team assembled to find him or her. The searchers wouldn't return until they found the missing person or discovered what happened.

Gorg easily accustomed herself to Grumbok-Tor's slow moving society and was, because of her extraordinary intelligence, made a priestess of the holy altar. This was a position of respect and responsibility, since the people were a gentle species who looked to the nature of the universe and it's Creator as wondrous and beautiful. Prayer and ceremony were an expression of their respect and awe for all the wonders of creation. The gentle natives were still innocent and ignorant of off-world corruption since neither G.C.C. exploration teams nor Samael's emissaries had as yet discovered them. Thus, Gorg became a complete native and loved her new world and its good-natured population. She would be permitted to live three life cycles here before being recalled to her Nashramh post and her native race. Until then, she and her kind would continue to search out the Gamma-B's of her fallen comrades and their allies until all had been found.

Chapter 4

Telly

Being raised in rough-and-tumble boy's school as a special child, can be difficult and perplexing . . . especially if you're a ward of the Nashramh and subject to their special rules. . . .

18:30-06 BENEM 8217-7N5

Large drops of wind-blown rain splashed against the wooden sashes of the single window, causing endless rivulets to wind their way down its long uneven lights of glass. Waving trees outside the window distorted the grey light filtering into the dusky room, adding to its somber atmosphere. It was nearly evening, and the torrid downpour cast a deepening shadow over the cold playground bordering the Haronel Academy for Young Men's administration building. It was the cold drizzling kind of rain which signaled the onset of another dark, dreary winter on Freccornal IV's southern hemisphere.

The boy, now six-years-old, sat alone on a high-backed chair disinterestedly watching the cold rivulets of water working their way down the long lights of glass. He shivered involuntarily as a gust of wind blew a burst of harshly pattering droplets against the window. He was small and slight, even for a child of six, and had a sweet, almost feminine face with dark green-silver eyes and dark green-tinged black hair. The other boys called him a sissy and a little girl. He hated that!

The pit of his stomach was still filled with pent-up anger, and now with the unease of wondering about what lay before him. He

looked down at his skinned knee through his torn trousers and at his bruised knuckles. Then he smiled to himself, almost wickedly.

The other boy, the one who'd called him demeaning names, hadn't fared so well. Telly had knocked one of his teeth out and presumably it still lay somewhere around the wet concrete playground. Telly could almost imagine their voices when the tooth was found:

"Hey! It must be ancient!"

"Yeah . . . wonder whose it was?"

"Oh, I know. . . ."

Heads would turn eagerly to learn the secret of 'The Tooth'.

"I heard that the Great Elf, Telly B'Meszhiah, knocked it out of that crud Fehr Tibon ages ago."

The voices would become hushed, because nine-year-old Fehr Tibon had been a terror with a greatly feared name.

"When? . . . When? . . . When?"

"It was ages and ages ago, in the great battle of Haronel playground. . . ."

Telly wondered whether they'd remember the black eye, too. He'd have broken that bastard Fehr's nose too if the other guys hadn't pulled him off and held him back until the blond sissy ran away, his eye already swelling and watering.

Telly's smile dropped a notch, then, faded. He really didn't like having to fight to make all the other guys stop calling him cruddy names. But, it sure felt good to see everyone's stunned faces when the now famous tooth had flown out and landed somewhere on the pavement with a tiny, yet, very distinct plop.

Yet, staring out at the endless rain that made the cold, darkening room seem even more depressing, like a prison, Telly just wished the others wouldn't make fun of him.

He stiffened, listening carefully; he thought he could hear someone approaching from down the long, carpeted hall. It was probably the expediter of his punishment . . . his executioner. He might even get expelled from here and sent to another school where he'd have to start all over again. But he'd sure gotten that crud Tibon good.

Sister Heide Dinken gracefully entered the room which was darkened, and flipped on the light switch as she passed it. Glancing briefly at the young boy sitting by the window, she proceeded to her chair behind the room's single table and seated

herself without speaking. Besides the table, her chair, and Telly's chair, there was no other furniture. Even the bright light which shone on soft white walls didn't make the room seem any less foreboding or depressing.

Telly, who continued staring out the window until she seated herself, immediately left his chair and approached the high wooden table, almost defiantly. Standing upright, rigidly at attention, he addressed the woman who gazed solemnly back at him.

"Beginning student B'Meszhiah reporting as ordered, Ma'am."

The older woman sat silently, studying him with odd, lavender eyes which were the only distinguishing feature on her otherwise emotionless face. Although staring straight ahead and at attention, with good practice Telly still could take in her foreboding appearance. He noted her hands, which were folded together, were grey and wrinkled with age, and they looked uncommonly frail, as if barely alive.

"Tell me, young man," she said abruptly, in a melodic voice. "Why is it that you are here?"

Telly figured she knew about the fight, but he complied anyway. Standing rigidly, facing her softly glowing eyes, almost too fascinated by their luminous beauty to respond, he blinked and cleared his throat.

"I was fighting on the playground, Ma'am."

"Now, why were you fighting?" she pressed. Telly was still drawn to her eyes. They were a burning shade of lavender he'd never seen before. They were mysterious and filled with adventure, of beauty, of peril . . . of many things. "Tell me."

"It was that crud Fehr Tibon who started it, Ma'am. He kept calling me a pussy because I don't have a weenie in a blanket like the other guys, and because I'm being raised by a bunch of witches." His words raced out. "And then Tibon took a poke at me. That's when I let him have it. I'd have busted his big nose too if the other guys hadn't pulled me off of him and held my arms."

A part of him was sorry that he hadn't been able to finish the fight on his terms. He'd wanted to give that bastard Tibon his medicine, every last bit of it.

Sister Heide continued to study this small, wiry elf-boy whose eyes shone brightly with frustration and anger as he spoke. He was a beautiful child, like most of his race, although in some way different from the High Elves she'd encountered before. It was

something more than his obvious maturity and the nature of his bearing. Yes, he was different.

"Do you know why you've been circumcised?" she asked, a bit amused by his term, 'weenie in a blanket'.

Telly nodded. "For cleanliness," he replied.

She nodded. So that's all he'd been told, when actually the circumcision was very much more. A marker, for one, "Is that all?" she asked flatly, never turning her gaze away from his.

"Yes Ma'am."

"Who taught you to fight so well, Telly? Or do you fight all the time?"

"Nobody Ma'am, I couldn't let them call me a pussy and call my teachers old witches."

"You didn't finish answering my question," she urged.

"Oh . . . no, I don't fight all the time . . . this is the first time."

"Thank you, Telly," she replied, changing the subject. "Now, tell me something about yourself, the things you like to think about. You know, the things that make you feel good, or perhaps sad."

Telly's hopes rose a bit; maybe he wouldn't be punished after all. It sure didn't seem like it, although he noticed her face was still expressionless. Her voice, though, was soft and wonderfully melodic, reminding him of old lullabies. Her lavender eyes continued to glow softly enchanting him . . . they were beautiful beyond description.

"I don't know how to tell you, Ma'am," he replied haltingly. He shrugged to himself as he tried to find an answer to her question. "There are so many things that I don't understand."

"Well, why don't you bring that chair over here to the table so we can both sit and talk for awhile," she suggested with a nod. "You have much to learn about yourself that can only come about by talking about it."

Telly's hopes rose even more, and he willingly complied. As he moved to get his chair, he experienced a strange sensation. A sudden chill, not entirely unpleasant, passed through his entire body making him shiver. In a moment it passed.

For the next four hours, until his bedtime, they sat together talking. Telly was at first hesitant and only hinted at some of his thoughts and feelings, but as he talked, something in those lovely lavender eyes eased his tension and feeling of self-consciousness.

He told her of his life at the nursery school and about all of his friends there, especially Sister Erdin whom he missed so much. He'd been here at Haronel Academy for nearly a year now and didn't like it because the other guys were always making fun of his size. They called him names like pussy and little girl. "Do you know what its like to have the guys pull at your hair and call you 'darling'?"

Then there were his dreams. They bothered him the most, and occurred almost every night for as long as he could remember. They were always the same, always so real and frightening and so very cold. Yes, he always had that feeling of intense cold.

In his dreams, he knew he had to hold onto something with his right hand, and it was very important that he didn't fail. At first his thumb hurt, although soon he couldn't feel his hand at all. Somehow, however, he knew he was still holding onto something.

And it was so cold, so very cold. A coldness that permeated his very being and . . . his hand . . . was it black?

And then falling . . . falling . . . falling . . . so black and empty and cold . . . he seemed to always be inside a room and falling.

After waking from the endlessly cold and lonely dream, he shook as if he'd never be warm again. It always took place a couple of hours before dawn and he could never get back to sleep. He'd lay there thinking about the dream, trying to figure out what was going on and what it all meant. He could remember bits and pieces of it, but never the whole thing. What bothered him the most was that somewhere in the recesses of his mind he felt he'd left something unfinished since the dream was reminding him of whatever it was he couldn't remember.

Telly's face took on a strange pallor as he told Heide about his dream, and his dark eyes looked off into some distant reality of his own. Haltingly, he told her about the two words. He was six, and had only been taught to read level one grammar, but he knew how to spell the word which was in an Odomak naval battle language that wasn't seen by children. The words which flashed on and off in red lights swirled around him:

DEADMAN ACTIVATED

He didn't know what the words meant, but he suspected it had something to do with whatever it was he was clutching in that cold, lonely room.

Sister Heide sat quietly, listening as the boy told her about his innermost thoughts. As she listened, she discovered that he was far more advanced than she'd anticipated. He was most certainly a special young man who promised to be of great value to her sisterhood, and was surprisingly young to be having dreams of this nature. According to his file, Telly was only a second generation off-world Meszian. She knew that until he was able to understand the true source of his dreams, he'd never be able to rest. Smiling, Heide made a note to herself to begin a remedial psycho-therapy program with the boy to direct him towards the necessary answers.

As Telly's bedtime approached, Heide thanked him for sharing his feelings and thoughts with her. Then she added, "About the fight this afternoon, Telly, you had every right to defend yourself when attacked. But, you must learn to recognize when your opponent is defeated and stop your attack. During the next few years, we will teach you much about fighting, and the responsibility that comes with such knowledge."

Telly nodded uncertainly as she spoke. He felt better after talking to her, but he still didn't understand all that had just transpired. It wasn't exactly what she said, but the strange effect her glowing lavender eyes had on his emotions and her gentle melodic voice that made him more willing to listen.

He felt comfortable with Heide and was happy to have someone to confide in. He was unnerved at times, especially when awakening alone in his pitch-black room. This would disorient him and he couldn't tell if he was back in his dream or in his own bedroom. Sister Heide suggested they install a night light in his room, so he'd have something to focus on when he awoke from a bad dream. Telly was worried that a light might give the other boys another reason to call him a sissy, but Heide assured him this would be their 'little secret' and no one would have to know about it. This made him feel a lot better.

Heide continued. "We'll talk about these things later. But now it's time for you to go to your room and get ready for bed. Good night," she nodded with a slight smile.

Telly stood up and bowed, although he didn't know why. "Good night, Ma'am." Then he turned and left the room.

It was still raining heavily outside and drops of water pelted against the window panes from out of the darkened sky.

Heide sat alone for a long time, pondering the boy's revelations to her. He was definitely an advanced personality who was destined to walk the ways of her Eternal Sisterhood. Of this there was no question . . . no question at all.

She just wished there was something that could be done about the dream. But then, it was something he'd have to live with until it finally surfaced to his conscious memory. Unfortunately, that could be a long time in developing.

* * *

12:00-14 JERIN 8224-7N5

Large drops of wind-blown rain splashed against the wooden sashes of the single window, causing endless rivulets to wind their way down the long uneven lights of glass. Outside, waving trees distorted the grey light, adding to the somber atmosphere. It was nearly evening, and the torrid downpour cast a depressing shadow over the buildings and playground. This was the kind of cold, wind-blown rain which signaled the onset of another dark, dreary winter season.

Telly was surprised to find that he was waiting in the same room nearly seven years after his first fight. The scene outside was exactly the same, and again he felt an increasing tension as he waited for Heide to arrive. They'd had many good sessions throughout the years and he'd learned to trust and confide in Heide. Her opinion of him was very important to Telly, and now he was afraid he'd disappointed her. Well, he'd soon find out just where he stood.

Heide entered the room and turned on the light as silently as the first time he'd seen her. She offered no pleasantries. Telly watched as she settled herself stiffly behind the wooden desk. Another might have missed the tension in her set shoulders, but he, as an initiate of the Shamboni internal control discipline, knew immediately. She would not compromise. He had to take what she dished out.

Heide's softly glowing lavender eyes offered no hint of her intent. She sat placidly before him, with her old, frail hands folded in front of her.

Telly pursed his lips as he stood at attention; she looked even more gaunt than usual.

"Telly, do you know why you're here?" She toned evenly.

"The fight, Ma'am," he answered softly, feeling awed by the subtle calm in her normally melodic voice.

"What happened?" she asked simply.

Telly didn't quite know how to answer her tactfully, so with practice of all his 13 years pushed aside, he blurted it out bluntly.

"Cruston said that the grads didn't want any pussies around, and the only reason I was still there was because I was being a little girl for the filthy sisterhood witches!"

Heide nodded. "And this made you upset enough to fight?" she countered.

Telly hesitated. "No, I've tried to discipline myself not to respond to what they say about me. After all, I know it's not true, and usually the other guys don't bother me about how I look anymore." Even at 13, Telly was small and lithe for his age. His face, still at the onset of puberty, retained a sweet innocent set, while his effeminate features hadn't developed into aquiline masculinity. To compound his problem, his voice hadn't begun to deepen. He still spoke shrilly and could sing as a male soprano.

No, he'd really come to disregard whatever the others said about him. He didn't even care about their derogatory comments against the sisterhood, which sent him representatives from administration for extra lessons. But Cruston had insulted Heide herself, his favorite and most trusted friend.

She continued studying him, waiting for his answer. Telly almost flinched under the intensity of her gaze, and he blurted out again. "Cruston said you were, uh, interested in pretty little girls and that you especially like the prospect of using a boy that looked like one." Suddenly he wanted to cry, although he knew that big boys weren't supposed to cry. His eyes glistened.

Then he was embarrassed because he'd lost control, much as he'd done in the fight. He felt completely frustrated! He most certainly didn't want to be a crybaby on top of everything else, but it seemed that he couldn't control his emotions no matter how hard he tried.

Heide watched as he brushed at his eyes, angrily. "First of all, Telly, it's not unmanly to cry. Oh, I know," she hurried, as she saw he was embarrassed, "that most boys think only little girls cry and if men do they're sissies. But in fact, a real man doesn't fear to show his sensitivities, at the right time and place. I've seen grown

men cry over the dead bodies of fallen comrades and over losses of people they loved and needed. So, if you ever have a need to cry, just go somewhere private where you can have it out. Someday too, you'll come to realize the difference between a child's tears and those of an adult. But both can feel."

Leaning forward she continued. "Crying can also be a release from tension. When things build up to a point that they're out of proportion and emotionally overwhelming, we often find ourselves in a position to overreact and strike out blindly in our frustration. At times like this, often crying can ease our tension and prevent a more serious problem. Believe me, I know, because I've been there. It makes no difference if you're a man or a woman we all hurt in the same way."

Telly nodded, awed, there were so many times he felt like crying, especially when he awoke from persistent dreams that left him with an empty feeling. There were those strangely familiar, but elusive, faces of people he knew from some distant time and couldn't quite reach or see. The dreams evoked haunting memories of a woman with calm emotionless eyes that drew him like a magnet. Who she was he could never remember, but he knew she was important.

In previous conversations, Heide told Telly that his dreams were important, and not to fight them. She emphasized that someday everything would make sense, but that time was still a long way off. He sure hoped so. It bothered him to see those oddly familiar faces of people he couldn't quite recognize. He knew he should remember who they were, especially when their images raised such strong nostalgic emotions in him. Something he couldn't understand kept holding him back and prevented him from remembering. Yes, maybe crying was the only answer.

"Second," Heide continued, "I don't condone fighting, since it is a practice of punishing and hurting people. You have been trained as a warrior, not a brawler. As a warrior, you may have to kill an opponent, but not torture or punish him. I can, however, see where you might feel the need to assert yourself in this." And indeed she did, for Heide knew that life was tough for a young boy with Telly's appearance and almost precocious bearing. Moreover, she was touched by his need to defend her against a direct insult, although she didn't condone this either.

"But, do you know why you're here?"

Assuming his first answer was wrong, Telly answered, "no, Ma'am."

Heide nodded. "You're not here to be punished for fighting, for in adolescents, even after the warning I gave you seven years ago, such emotions of anger and frustration cannot be easily quelled. You're here to be punished because you carried the fight too far. It seems you haven't learned the responsibilities you've assumed with your lessons in warrior tactics. What happened?"

Telly began to understand. "I kicked him after he was down and out of the fight," he replied with a sense of cold finality in his voice.

"Why?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I'd like to say I lost control, saw red, or some other excuse, but I can't. All I know is I wanted to teach him a lesson. . . ."

He thought back, remembering how he stood over the young man, who lay curled up on the muddy ground, rocking and holding his injured knee.

Telly related how he had, after several blows on each side, whirled around and caught the young man in an armlock and around the throat from behind, bending his own right knee so his foot was locked behind the boy's leg. He had jammed the fellow's knee into the ground with a sharp thrust of his foot, snapping it. Telly released his throat hold, freeing his opponent who howled and pitched forward, doubling up and grabbing at his broken knee. He lay there and whimpered, yes, that was it, whimpered in pain, and held his knee in both hands. His face was white, and he knew it was broken.

"Damn you, you stinking pussy," he muttered between clenched teeth, and still angry, Telly looked down at him with a sense of loathing. Suddenly, for some reason, he felt proud. He'd really and truly beaten this guy, and everyone knew it. Then without forethought or warning he kicked Cruston.

With a slowly dawning horror, he realized that he'd just kicked the fallen young man, this Cruston whom he'd beaten fair and square and who was out for the count. He kicked him in the stomach, in the damned stomach!

He'd forgotten his sense of responsibility. He'd beaten the guy. There was no reason to continue. It was when the poor fool had stupidly called him a "stinking pussy", even after being beaten and badly hurt, that Telly decided to punish him further. But that was

no excuse. His entire body was a fine-honed weapon and he knew it. He'd expressly been taught never to fight unless ordered to by a legal authority, or to defend human life.

Heide nodded, pleased not only at his honesty, but that he'd flatly stated the facts, and he hadn't rationalized.

She then set his punishment - an increase in his academic workload and his already long physical training workouts. His prize was lost; there would be no chance for him to compete in this year's junior Olympiad. He was ordered to apologize to Cruston immediately, and she concluded with a stern warning.

"Telly, if this ever happens again, we will expel you from Nashramh custody. You must remember above all else that you are human, not a beast, and you must hold true to your human values and, yes, to the moral dictates of your conscience." She put him under house arrest for three years, allowing him only to leave his room for classes and training activities. He was to have no social life for this period and was forbidden to speak to other students about anything but classroom business. Above all, he was forbidden to fight anyone for any reason, even if he had to run away.

After this, Telly devoted himself to Shamboni internal control disciplines, during which, in his long meditation sessions, he heightened his powers of concentration. He learned much about self-control and his own inner workings. He only fought in the gymnasium as required by his training, but he determined never to use his skills in earnest unless faced with a life or death conflict.

* * *

During his first year as a senior contender for the inter-school military and athletic tournaments, known as the Olympiad, Telly was called upon to compete in Shambu tactics. He'd worked long and hard to prepare for the event. He flexed his muscles slowly and internally regulated his flow of adrenalin as he relaxed during the prematch pause.

By his 18th birthday, Telly had thoroughly mastered the tenth degree of Shambu attack and defense tactics for individual combat. Because of his skill and natural ease, he was in a category by himself; few students of Shambu tactics had ever reached this level of excellence before their 50th year. The standard for most was usually 100 years. But Telly's small size, compared to his

classmates, and his iron determination to excel, contributed to his early successes. He definitely had the makings of a Shambu master.

As Telly's fighting abilities increased, his fights with his classmates came to a halt. None had ever fought him without sustaining a serious injury. His last opponent, a bully five years his senior who'd been offended by the 'little girl' hanging around the grad-club, had spent a month and a half in the academy's hospital with a broken knee and a ruptured spleen. That was five years ago, and no one was foolish enough to challenge him again. Telly was severely punished by his sisterhood counselor, Heide, who warned him that any repetition of this conduct would be considered as a criminal act and punishable as such.

"Enter the arena," the mediator's voice sounded over a hidden loudspeaker. Telly nodded to himself, stood up, and approached the three-by-three meter matted area. It was stationed at the lowest level of the interior performance gymnasium, and on all sides, seated in rows of tiered seats, the audience watched him expectantly. Behind the judge's table, on the left, were his teammates and other schoolmates. Seated next to them were the members of various other schools', with each wearing their respective academy colors.

The excited chatter of the audience tapered off as Telly entered the arena. He stood and faced his opponent, a younger boy with light blue skin and a stocky build.

Telly knew the boy was a year and a half younger than he, and attended the Kroaker Academy, a local version of the G.C.C. military academy. Telly couldn't figure out how someone younger than 18 had gotten to the finals, much less the true senior-grade proficiency exercises. These competitions were reserved for the best seniors. The boy's name was 'Raphael', although his friends called him 'Phel'. He must be pretty good, Telly mused to himself.

Stripped to the waist and wearing loose shorts, Telly faced Phel and appraised his stance and rhythm. Oddly, the blue guy seemed relaxed and casual; many opponents tried to unnerve Telly with various shouts and jeers, or an appearance of calm superiority. He realized these were only tactics. The true master of Shambu always attacked with complete silence, stealth, and speed, for the object wasn't to instill fear into the opponent, but to disarm and disengage him as quickly and skillfully as possible.

This blue guy was different. Although he was obviously relaxed, his eyes were soft and deep and totally calm. That bothered Telly. Strangely, they seemed familiar. He just couldn't remember meeting this guy before, but those eyes bothered him.

Telly relaxed his own stance and took three quick breaths to calm his muscles. The buzzer sounded, but for a few seconds neither man moved, or even gave a sign of having heard the buzzer.

Telly advanced to the inner ring cautiously, moving slowly on the balls of his bare feet. Phel observed that the elf had the subtle stealth, bearing, and senses of a cat. Phel had not yet moved.

Suddenly, Telly ducked and spun into a lightning-fast knee kick and kidney slap. He not only missed, but was knocked nearly senseless by an open-handed blow to his right temple. He pitched forward, surprised, rolled and then spun back onto his feet. His adversary stood quietly appraising him.

Telly attacked again and again, only to be slapped silly by his ever calm opponent. For a brief moment he was compelled to strike a damaging blow to his antagonist, but suppressed the urge by sheer willpower. He'd never in his life been beaten! And now he was being slapped around like some little kid - and hadn't landed a single blow. The blue guy just waited quietly and countered his every move.

Telly was sweating freely, but his opponent looked as cool as still water. He could move, then counter move. Maybe Phel's apparent strength could be turned against him. If he could appear to blunder, and then attack with an unorthodox move, he might bring Phel to his knees and then. . . .

Suddenly, with a blinding movement, Phel struck. Within seconds, he had Telly down for the count, exactly ten seconds before the buzzer concluded the match.

When Telly woke up, his head was whirling and his vision was foggy. Slowly, his eyes cleared and he saw those soft, deep, calm eyes looking down at him.

"Are you all right?" asked the obviously concerned boy, his voice softly mellow.

"Yeah, I'm all right," Telly responded. "Just give me a minute to put my brains back in, and then we can get on with the match."

The other boy smiled. "They told me you were a tough one, and now I know what they mean. Thanks for a good match."

Telly's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Ha! I didn't even touch you!" He wasn't sure if the guy was sarcastic or sincere. Well, the way he could fight, Telly didn't want to find out.

"Yes, but your sophisticated tactics were enough to fell any opponent," Phel responded.

Telly was confused. Then his countenance cleared and he began to understand. This guy, although he didn't know how, must be a Shambu master!

Telly was aided to the locker room by his teammates, who were awestruck by the entire match. All the while, they discussed this blue guy Phel. He must be from some warrior race nobody had ever dealt with before. If Telly, who was so much better than any of them, was out-matched by him, then they all were. Nobody was fool enough to accept a challenge from him.

Telly had a great deal of thinking to do. He knew he wasn't anywhere near as advanced as he'd thought. After all, the blue guy taught him a vital lesson that everybody had to learn sooner or later - there is always somebody tougher, even if they're younger and smaller than you are. He wouldn't forget this lesson easily.

Telly was surprised to be called to his counselor's office without an appointment. As he strode in, he noted that Heide really hadn't changed since he met her more than 15 years ago, when he was six.

He was mystified. Was something wrong? Recounting the past month, he could remember nothing out of the ordinary.

Heide was already seated at the table; previously she'd always entered after him. He was a few minutes early. Something must be up.

She wore her usual tan jumpsuit as always only the sleeves were rolled up, revealing her thin forearms.

Heide motioned him to sit down.

"Well Telly, I won't be keeping you in suspense anymore," she said with a little smile that softened her old, grey face. Telly's right eyebrow went up; was he that easy to read?

"Perhaps you've wondered why I've summoned you here today. Well, I have some news for you; I'll be leaving Haronel Academy for another assignment in a few days, so I thought we might say our farewells. Besides, I wanted to brief you a little on your next counselor, Sister Elfin Nulph. She's a recent graduate of Tiporal University for general arts."

Telly couldn't believe what he was hearing. Heide was leaving? Somehow, he had the impression that she'd always been here and always would be.

"Oh," he answered lamely, realizing he would miss her terribly. She was his friend and confidante and had really helped him over some rough spots. He suddenly remembered her sensitivity when he told her about being afraid in the dark, and her arranging for a night light in his bedroom. That light had been a friend in the dark and something to focus on as he withdrew back into his mind trying to remember. Now she was leaving. He knew this would happen someday, just like removing the light from his room. But who would he have to talk to?

Heide nodded. "One thing you'll learn about the Nashramh is that changes in assignments are often abrupt, and never fully explained until you're en route to the next one. In this way, complete security is maintained and little, if anything gets into the wrong hands."

She unfolded her hands and reached down into her lap, bringing up a worn old volume. "I've learned much about you over these past years, Telly, as I hope you've learned about me and our sisterhood. And I know you're fond of poetry, especially expressions of the well-known Telenji B'Seraph. So I want you to have this volume of her works, which is one of the few anthologies exclusively of her personal writings. Will you accept it?"

Telly was stunned, although pleased with the valuable gift. "I would be honored," he murmured, gently accepting the careworn volume. He gingerly opened it to reveal the soft cream-colored pages with dark gold writings. The small volume was indeed rare, for the writing was in the script of the poet herself, and not in standard typeface. Telenji had written her thoughts lovingly in small, curly script that reached out to Telly even as he recited a piece:

"Treasure every fleeting moment,
Memories of futures past . . .
Tears are just the jewels that sadden
the smile behind the looking glass . . .
the smile behind the looking glass . . ."

This was the last stanza of one of his favorite poems, for somehow it always made him feel nostalgic, so nostalgic, that he

almost felt sick to his stomach. Studying the aged handwriting on each page, he could almost picture her, in times past, writing these lovely words for future generations to appreciate. This was a part of her very being. It was her legacy to those who were as yet unborn. He'd seen pictures of Telenji and often wondered what she'd been like. He knew she'd been a very sensitive woman; the gentle words on the pages testified to that.

He looked up at Heide in amazement. She nodded. "Yes, no one really knows who first wrote the core of that poem, but Telenji B'Seraph has been credited with restoring and adding much to it."

Telly nodded, his eyes glistening, and turned to the front overleaf, gently flipping the pages one at a time. At the top of the overleaf, Heide had written a small inscription in Nashramh high script:

"To my friend Telakin B'Meszhah.
May your future be bright and fruitful,
and may you find your own true smile,
behind the looking glass. . . ."

He blinked back tears again, not really sure why they'd come into his eyes in the first place. So, she knew. . . .

He noticed that Heide's name was written in a beautiful hand below that of another person. Looking closely at the other signature, Telly made out the name 'Alsis Jeffnel'. For an instant he thought he recognized the name, but couldn't remember from where. "Oh, no," he thought to himself, "another of those fleeting memories that keep nagging at me."

Heide nodded again, to herself; she'd been right to give this volume to the young elf. She knew this when she saw the love for it in Telly's eyes. She knew he would treasure it, as a long lost friend of hers had when she'd owned it. Alsis had finally come back after her terrible experience at Borgdragon Estate's interrogation center. Yes, Alsis would be happy, if she were here and knew this young man. . . .

"I don't know how to thank you," Telly murmured.

"There's nothing for you to thank me for, Telly," she assured him. "Someday, you'll see fit to give it to another person whom you know will benefit from it . . . just as you will. After all, the future truly belongs to the young, and the best from our past is all that we can really offer to them. A gift, my young friend, is really. . . ."

"The blessing of the giver," Telly answered, and they chuckled together at the old adage. He nodded and carefully closed the worn book. On the spine of the cover there were bits of thin gold thread, so worn that the faint title they formed was difficult to see. Studying the worn letters carefully, Telly made out the words 'The Gold Threads' by Telenji B'Seraph. He placed it in his lap and looked back up at Heide.

She smiled a little. "I also wanted to congratulate you on your match with Raphael B'Thebel back in 8229. You're even more experienced than we'd expected."

Telly knew better than to rebut her compliment, although he really didn't feel good about the outcome of the so-called contest. To him, it seemed as though a three-year-old had tried to outmatch a 50-year-old. "I thank you," he answered humbly. "But I see there's much that I have to learn."

"Very few people who've been used to victory are capable of such an admission. I have no doubt you will continue to improve. Although you were defeated, you are still well on your way to Shambu mastery."

Telly itched to ask her a question, but he knew that certain questions were outside the domain of his counseling sessions and wouldn't be answered. He'd tried this once, many years ago, when he tried to recover from a bad experience. Another young boy, just arrived at Haronel Academy, had openly tried to make friends with him. He knew the other students loved to tease anyone who was new, and had befriended the boy, whose name was Tobin. The two were constant companions for a number of weeks when Telly accidentally overheard a loud conversation between Tobin and some other boys. He'd been walking past the corner of the gymnasium and heard them talking.

"Yeah, that Telly is weird, a real pussy," Tobin said, "Did you know that he sings like a girl?" The other boys giggled; everyone knew that.

Telly wanted to make his feet move, but just couldn't. Besides, he had a right to hear what they were saying about him.

Tobin went on to say other derogatory things about him, apparently because he wanted to be accepted by the other boys. Telly felt himself flush with shame as he heard some of his secret thoughts broadcast to the other kids, and resolved never to speak to Tobin as a friend again.

It hurt to hear the boy broadcasting his inner thoughts all over the place, especially to these cruds. But more than anything, he felt rotten because a friend had let him down.

Later, when Heide asked him about what was eating at him, he blurted out the whole thing. She had nodded, then, asked, "Why do you think he said those things?"

"Because he's a jerk," Telly muttered angrily.

Heide nodded again. "I can see how you might feel that way, but I suspect he meant no harm by it. He's a very lonely and insecure boy who wants to be part of the gang. You shouldn't have listened in secret, for I believe the truth is that he truly likes you, and was simply put on the spot." She was Tobin's counselor too, and had listened to his tearful admission of the things he'd felt pressed to say.

"Do you mean if I hadn't listened, everything would have gone on as before, and he would still be my friend?"

"Child, no one knows just what would have happened. But I suspect he was just weak, and meant you no harm."

Leaning back, she continued. "You must understand that whenever you say something, whether good or bad, you can never unsay it. It becomes a part of temporal reality, of the sands of time, forever. Once you hear something, you can never unhear it and this poses a dilemma, especially when it's something you weren't intended to hear. Tobin will lose face if you bring it up to him, just as your feelings have been hurt by overhearing him. You've lost a friend unless you're big enough to overcome your wounded feelings and put this episode behind you."

Telly thought about this for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't think I can ever feel the same about him." Then, with the remarkable insight that some children have, he added, "if a person is my enemy, there's a chance that in time we can become friends under the right circumstances. But a friend who turns on me can never be my friend again, no matter what his intention."

Waving his hand, Telly emphasized his feelings. "Loyalty goes both ways. If I'm loyal to someone, I expect him to be loyal to me in return. If those morons made fun of my friend, I'd stick up for him. That, to me, is what being a friend is about. Joining the enemy camp and disclosing confidences is not!"

"Oh, my dear boy," Heide spoke softly, "you have much to learn about making such hasty judgments. Your words appear sound on

the surface, but they lack compassion and real insight. I have no quarrel with you on your attitudes concerning loyalty, but quite often we see things in black and white when they're really shades of grey. You must try to understand a situation and see things through another person's eyes before you draw the line. You can't expect something from people that they can't perform. This is something you will learn, Telakin B'Meszhiah, as you gain more experience in life."

Telly never quite understood what she meant, but then he wasn't sure about many things she said. But she wasn't sympathizing with him, and he felt chastised. Now he was interested in learning about this guy Phel, whom he felt drawn to. Those calm eyes had been so strange, although unsettlingly familiar.

"What is it that you want to ask, Telly?"

"Well . . . is Phel a Shambu master?"

This young man was far more advanced than Heide imagined. Such a question couldn't be taken lightly, for in the asking, he had some suspicion of the answer. After all, he of all people knew that to become a Shambu master took centuries, and was completely impossible for a boy of 17. This was impossible, unless of course, the boy had learned his skills in another gamma-cycle.

To Heide's knowledge, Telly had no reason to know such things as repeated life-cycles were a reality, so to ask such a question suggested he was on the right track.

"Yes, he is," she stated flatly, then said no more.

Telly's mind whirled with the impact of this short statement. Heide, however, didn't elaborate, so the two spent the next several hours over a pleasant tea, and they parted as friends.

Several days later, Telly was summoned to another counseling session at the administration building. This time he knew it was to meet his new counselor, Sister Elfin Nulph. On his way, he wondered what she'd be like. Heide said she was very young, but still he was unprepared.

Elfin was attractive and sexually alluring. To Telly's surprise, she wasn't much older than he. As she sat across the table from him, he appraised her carefully, unsure as to how to respond to her presence. She had soft, beautiful, glowing eyes similar to Heide's, but in a different shade of lavender.

As the two chatted, Telly found he was unable to relax. She had a soft, soothing voice very much like Heide's, and even some similar mannerisms - and very obvious sexual appeal.

Although he had the normal drives of a 21-year-old, Telly hadn't taken very much interest in girls. On the other hand, they were usually interested in him. By now he'd grown out of his 'pussey' stage, but was still small and wiry for his age. He'd finally grown into his face, which was now sensitive and almost beautiful in a completely masculine sense. He smiled often, and the girls just wouldn't keep away from him. Although he'd dated several young women whom he liked very much, he felt a greater urgency about preparing for his future.

But this Elfin was different; she held an attraction for him that was markedly mature. Oh, he knew this wasn't love at first sight, or even infatuation at this point, but he couldn't just look at her as an impartial counselor.

He was desperately trying to concentrate on her dialogue, but his eyes kept returning to her beautifully formed breasts, which were accentuated by her well-fitting sweater.

After a time, Elfin sat back, her sweater tightening against her breasts. Without a trace of a smile or any sense of scorn, she said, "you seem drawn to my figure. Would you like me to take my sweater off so you can have a better look?"

Telly, whose eyes had again unconsciously dropped to her breasts, felt a slow flush crawl over his face, and embarrassed, he forced his eyes to meet hers.

"I'm sorry, Telly, I didn't mean to offend you . . ." Elfin spoke evenly, suddenly remembering something from her ancient past. She had been young, and in front of her sat a young man, named Arden. . . .

As she said those words, she saw the same embarrassment in the other young man. She'd remained Arden's counselor, but he'd never really liked her, and it took her awhile to realize that this callous statement had alienated him. It took even longer for her to admit the error to herself and to correct it.

"So," she mused, "history does repeat itself."

Leaning forward again, and folding her hands placidly in front of her in a gesture characteristic of Heide, she continued. "I didn't mean to embarrass you, Telly. You are an attractive man, and there's no reason why you shouldn't be interested in a girl's figure.

My offer is legitimate, if you wish." Oh, damn, there she went again. . . .

"No thank you . . . it's just . . ." he stammered, and then fell silent.

She nodded, saddened by her mistake. "Have I offended you, Telly?"

He shook his head. Looking directly into her lavender eyes, he began haltingly. "No, Sister Elfin . . . you haven't offended me. Actually, you see . . . it's the girls who stare at me and try to proposition me."

Elfin nodded. "Telly, how old do you think I am?"

"About 20 or so," he replied.

"Actually, I am more than 160,000 years old."

Telly was startled by this revelation, and wondered if she was playing games with him. Looking directly into her eyes, he noted that they were candid.

"Yes, I think you've had hints about such things, and during our sessions together, we'll discuss them at length, if you wish. But in essence, I've had repeated lives for many thousands of years that I can remember clearly as if it were one continuous life, with death only being a short period of sleep between waking periods. Have you ever wondered, Telakin, why certain people seem to display special talents at an early age, at an age when they obviously have no real experience? Such as the so-called genius who can sit down and play a musical instrument or write a complete symphony before he's five years old?"

Telly knew what she was saying. Phel was certainly a Shambu master, and that kind of knowledge was impossible for anyone his age, unless they'd lived before. Yes, what she said was obviously true.

"I don't know how to . . . or what to say. . . ."

"Oh, you needn't worry about responding, Telly. Actually, it's my responsibility to share certain of our secrets with you, which we trust you're mature enough to keep to yourself."

"I give you my solemn word that I will not divulge anything that you say to me in confidence," Telly nodded.

"You've lived before, Telly, and have died in the service of the G.C.C. navy. You are special in that you can remember bits of that last experience through your dreams, and possibly through waking

experiences. This makes you special, among other of your traits, in our eyes."

"I do have recurring dreams," he replied, "but they're all just out of reach and I can't seem to grasp them. I get pretty frustrated because I know where I am and who's with me when I'm dreaming. But, as I begin to wake up and, well, everything just seems to be pulled away from me and I watch them slowly disappear. This is when the sense of terrible nostalgia engulfs me. Then something will happen during the day . . . I'll hear a voice or see a familiar object, and for a fleeting instant I recall a fragment of one of my dreams. But then, I'm left with a total blank and I'm back at ground zero."

"That's because you're not a binary personality, which I will discuss with you in-depth at a later time. You will remember much more in the years to come because you are special in your makeup. It'll only require a bit more maturity on your part and then things will begin to fall into place."

Telly nodded; he'd suspected this, although he hadn't known until Elfin put it into words. "Then the dreams were real?"

"Yes, the dreams are memories of your past. Your dreams of the void and the deadman switch are very real. My point here is that even after many thousands of years of continuous conscious experience and memory I still make many foolish mistakes. I've had many different bodies, which are really my clothes, and I'm particularly happy with my appearance and how I feel now. I didn't mean to offend you with my offer, Telly, for I forgot that you, as with most people, your body is much more personal. It's not that I don't consider my body to be personal, because I do. It's just that I view myself in a different way. I've had so many different kinds of bodies over the centuries that I've come to consider them to be more like clothing. Yes, clothing I need to move around in the temporal universe. The real person to whom you're speaking is me, the woman who occupies this wonderful body."

Then, laughing, she added, "You must forgive my frankness, since I too have much to learn about dealing with young men, and I suspect I'll make some errors in judgment and in my manner of approach. Please bear with me when I do this."

Telly considered Elfin's words and concluded that her honesty was refreshing. He wasn't intimidated a bit by her revelation of her extreme age, and this lack of awe struck him as being quite

natural. He saw her only as a young woman with the special features of past memories and accumulated knowledge. Mostly she was a lovely young woman. She wasn't a game-player like so many of the girls he'd known, and her obvious maturity was explained by her revelations. This would, indeed, be an interesting and maybe exciting friendship.

Elfin was privately glad her mistake hadn't made an enemy of this boy, as it had with Ardel so long, long ago. At least she'd grown a little since then. It hadn't bothered her to admit the mistake, when before she'd just chalked it up to Arden's own insecurities and his dislike for her.

"If only my memories would surface before I make these foolish mistakes," she mused to herself. It seemed that the further back the memories went, the harder they were to remember which got her in the most trouble.

The two talked about general matters for awhile, but Telly was still considering her disclosure of her true age. Probing the subject he indirectly brought up his contest with Phel, noting that it seemed that his friend had similar traits to Elfin.

"You know, Elfin, I'm not really bothered by the fact that I lost the fight with Phel, although at first I was," he spoke almost as if thinking aloud. "What's really been eating at me is that I suddenly became aware that I really don't know anything. Being a good fighter is only superficial, but being good and knowledgeable about life and things associated with it is far more important. I feel something like a Saoure-Mem that just hatched out of an egg. I don't really know anything, even about myself, and I can't seem to resolve the situation."

Elfin sat back nodding, "You just said a mouthful, my dear Telly," she laughed. "It takes normal people a dozen lifetimes outside their normal environment to come to that conclusion. There's nothing wrong with your mind, Telly, nothing that more experience and the opportunity to learn won't cure."

Without discussing the question further, she brought the subject back to girls and his relationships with them. "If it doesn't bother you too much, Telly, I'd like to know what you meant when you said that girls usually make passes at you, and not vice-versa. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, not on the surface," he responded slowly. "But, I'm not really interested in sampling a lot of girls' bodies. What I find to be

important is to know someone well, and to develop a close and sensitive relationship. I have my fantasies of course, but I feel that once the boundary between fantasy and reality is breached, something valuable is lost. I know I'm not expressing myself well, but the point I'm driving at is that truly personal feelings and relationships shouldn't be dissipated on passing fancies."

"You make yourself quite clear, Telly," Elfin toned. "And I appreciate your frankness. In time I too hope to be as candid with you about my feelings on important matters. I will not play games with you or in any way violate your confidence in me. I fully intend to earn your respect as both your counselor and friend."

After a few more minutes of conversation, they decided to adjourn their conference for the day. When Telly left the room, Elfin reviewed Heide's extensive notes on the young man, noting that her predecessor was absolutely right in her analysis of his special characteristics.

She smiled to herself. It certainly was fortunate that the sisterhood spotted Telly before the Ansharim's agents had. He had all of the makings of a Magum.

Chapter 5

Chevoni

Telly's life was always ordered and directed toward a single goal, whether he realized it or not . . . he was first and foremost, a soldier. But, there was more to it . . . always lurking just below the surface of his reality. . . .

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She was the strangest-looking girl Telly had ever seen. Tall and slender, with a light bony frame that seemed as fragile and delicate as a paper kite, she appeared almost wraith-like. Her soft, lean features were dominated by large multi-colored eyes which glittered alternately with the colors of the rainbow and as brightly as if they contained a thousand tiny facets. Her lovely hair was pure white and hung straight and silky to her waist, caught up in a silver ribbon at the nape of her long neck.

Chevoni sat alone on the stage of the Naval Officer's Club, strumming on a long-handled, 12 string Strassa, and singing without a microphone. Her slow, studied movements and flowing voice captured the entire audience.

As Telly and Phel maneuvered through the crowded lounge, Telly became entranced by the solitary figure on the stage. Phel had to steer him through the crowd. He had eyes only for the singer.

Chevoni's haunting songs suggested dark and lonely places, where love lay muted in shadowy repose, awaiting the hungry soul that would draw her up into the vibrant light of life.

Telly was spellbound by her haunting words, which wove together a lament of lonely despair on far-off rim-worlds. The slow rhythms engulfed Chevoni like swirling evening mists as she swayed gently while strumming her Strassa. The music touched each person in the room, bringing long-hidden memories to the surface. Each person in the audience sensed that the lovely music was directed at him or her alone. Nothing else but their private thoughts seemed to matter.

To Telly, Chevoni was as beautiful as her music. Her ethereal beauty transcended sexual attraction; something about her reached deep into his very being and he began to feel pangs of nostalgia tugging at him.

Phel sat back, sipping at his dark ale. He too was enthralled by this lovely girl's spellbinding songs, and his eyes became softer and deeper as if locked in some distant memory. An old friend of his, one who'd always loved ancient lyrics, was especially fond of these rimworld songs.

The two young men had just been commissioned as junior grade Lieutenants in the G.C.C. Navy, and were awaiting assignments to specialty training schools. During the last six years, Phel and Telly had been roommates at the G.C.C.'s Naval Officer College at Acksoe Station. Now they were going their different directions.

As he listened to the soft music, Telly remembered how he'd applied to the Pathfinder Corps. The Pathfinders accepted only gifted candidates from outside the normal delta-type racial groups. They needed personnel who were much denser in their physical makeup than most humans, and possessed of superior strength and stamina. Telly didn't qualify as such, but from all indications, he'd nevertheless been accepted, and the paperwork was in the final stages. There was no question in his mind that he was cut out for the job, even though he was lighter than normal human density by 20 percent, and he looked forward to the grueling training schedule of the pathfinder academy.

Telly had concluded that expanding his mental resources was of the utmost importance, but he'd decided to enlist the rigorously physical pathfinder corps for two reasons. First, he had an overriding desire to pursue planetside operations for the immediate future, since he now understood the significance of his childhood dreams that still surfaced during times of stress.

Second, he really liked the wide diversity of pathfinder operations, which included teaching, tactical and strategic planning, medical and surgical training, astral-navigation, communications, incursions into enemy-held territory, and many others.

His own preference was centered in the deep raids and intelligence probes on worlds held by the black ones, especially when these actions involved the Nashramh. He hoped, in time, to engage in operations wherein the Nashramh and G.C.C. could build a better relationship, and even move towards joining forces without the suspicions and fears that prevailed in the past.

Oddly enough, it was Sister Elfin who recommended him for pathfinder training. He'd been interested in it, but doubted his physical abilities and personal stamina would be adequate. But one day she called him in for an unscheduled conference, and when he'd entered the room, there was a strange man sitting next to the table with her.

After he'd reported in, Elfin nodded and asked him to sit down. "Telakin B'Mesziah, this is Major Ham Ordin, of the G.C.C. Pathfinder Corps. At present he's on leave, and I thought the two of you might like to get acquainted and discuss your interest in joining the pathfinder corps." Then she nodded, rose, and left the room.

Telly turned to Ham, who was an Odomak, a race which was notoriously perplexed by the Nashramh Sisterhood's secret ways, and a member of one of the G.C.C.'s most closely knit military organizations. He wasn't only relaxed, but surprisingly soft-spoken and cordial. Not at all the picture Telly imagined of the rough and tough pathfinder warrior.

The two talked together for several hours, as Telly, then 21, clarified his feelings and desires about such a career. Ham discussed various aspects of the pathfinder corps with him, and informed him of some tests he could take at the G.C.C. Naval Officer Candidate College, where Telly had been accepted several months earlier. He would graduate from his primary training just after his 22nd birthday and move on to the Naval College the following year.

Telly was so interested in everything the Odomak was saying that he didn't think to ask why a G.C.C. naval officer had seen fit to come and talk with him at the behest of a Nashramh sister.

Later he realized there was much to be learned about the relationships between the Nashramh and the pathfinders. Obviously they weren't strangers and shared many of the same secrets.

Telly had taken all of the suggested tests, and completing his education at the Naval College, received notice that he was being considered for assignment to the Pathfinders Academy on Tuckomay-Brit.

Phel, for some ungodly reason, applied for a commercial communications school.

Telly turned his attention from Chevoni's performance and appraised his friend carefully, considering how to broach the subject that had been bothering him for years. There was something compelling in Chevoni's mystical songs that brought the question back to the surface and urged him to invade Phel's privacy.

The two became fast friends after the famous Olympiad debacle back at Haronel. Shortly after Telly began his counseling sessions with Elfin, she introduced the two. Telly learned that Elfin and Phel were old acquaintances. He also found that Elfin was only one of the names she'd used down through the centuries of her awareness. Again, as always, it seemed, Telly was thunderstruck by the complexity of things he'd never considered before. Although Elfin discussed many things with him during his last two years at Haronel, he still never seemed to know enough when she pulled out another mind-boggling secret for him.

"Elfin," he said once after a discussion about the complexities of binary personalities, "the more you tell me, the more I feel that I don't know."

She laughed softly. "Telly, you have a knack of making real understatements. You'll find, in time, that no matter how much you've learned, there's always much more. In a thousand, or a hundred thousand years, you realize that all of the knowledge you've acquired is only a grain in the sands of time. And all through this learning and experiencing process, you'll always find how little you really know.

"If you recall the first meeting you and I had together, I told you about the mistakes I've made in the past, and I continue to make. Learning is a never-ending process, no matter how old you are. I view living and learning as an adventure-laden path with pitfalls all

along the way and no end in sight. To me, that appears to be the only rational way to approach the unknown. Otherwise an irrational fear of the future would overwhelm me. All any of us can do is try our best to learn from the past, apply its lessons to the present, and look to the future as a challenge to be met. For the most part, I've found that this philosophy has worked for me."

"That may be," Telly agreed. "But I often feel as though I am learning too slowly. What help can I be against the black ones if I'm too young and inexperienced?"

Elfin shook her head. "What use would you be if you were so frightened that you could do nothing but hide, or thrash out at shadows? For the knowledge I have would destroy you if it were thrust on you too soon or quickly. To me, and my kind, this knowledge, which has been acquired over more than 100,000 years of living experience, has become accepted as commonplace even as you accept your acquired abilities in Shambu among your peers. But, for you to know all that I, and my kind, have learned over our many lifetimes is impossible. This knowledge must come ever so slowly, with a great deal of living thought, experience, and wisdom.

"You are inexperienced in the causative universe outside of your home world of Mesziah, which is, by the way, an unspoiled and beautiful world populated by symbiotic races of elves and faeries. But, you have to start somewhere. Actually, you're off to a premature start because you, and your kind, remember bits and pieces of your past life-cycles through your subconscious dreams and eventually with your conscious minds. Remember how sad and nostalgic you feel in your dreams and after you awaken? Can you imagine, Telly, what it would be like to have a total conscious memory of everyone you've ever known and loved from out of the dead past? If you haven't learned to accept your life and reason for being in an experienced and mature way, your emotions and sense of loss would eventually tear you apart. I've learned to accept and control these feelings, but not without a long sequence of living experiences and personal effort. Another thing to remember, Telly, is that there will always be someone like me around to help you over the hard parts, just as I had someone to help me. In this we all work together as a team. In time, you'll be one of us and help guide new and inexperienced souls to grow and face our uncertain future."

He nodded. "I think I understand what you mean. Nothing comes easily or in complete packages. I'll have to learn in small increments just like everyone else does."

"Yes."

He paused, considering what she'd said before asking his next question. "What about my dreams?"

"I think you're ready to delve into them," she nodded, leaning back in her chair. "Just what do you want to know?"

"Once you said that you knew about the cold and the deadman switch. What can you tell me about that?"

"Sometimes we have dreams that are more than sub-conscious activities or ethereal occurrences but which are shadowy glimpses of our past experiences. In your case, they're emerging memories from your last temporal life experience and the period of death between then and now. You were a Lieutenant on the Odomak Lead Destroyer, 'Constance', which was destroyed during the Great Conflagration. You were a trusted officer assigned to man the ships deadman switch and were killed by a massive flux discharge from an exploding enemy vessel. Everyone on your craft was frozen in a solid state by the discharge and your hand was unable to release the deadman mechanism. Because of this, our mortuary recovery vessel 'Bousel', back in 7956-7N5, discovered the derelict Constance and recovered its dead crew, including your body and gamma-complex. You were found gripping the deadman switch, your hand still frozen in place."

Telly was stunned. He sat still for a few minutes, wondering what the last moments of the battle must have been like, what his expectations had been, the people he'd known . . .

Now he understood why he had that feeling of leaving something undone. He had. Granted, it hadn't been his fault and now he understood why. Maybe now the dream about the 'deadman' switch wouldn't bother him so much, and he could put it in some kind of perspective.

Elfin continued after a long pause. "The faces you see are those of people long dead, but you shouldn't dwell on them now, since you're not ready for the great burden that the memory of their loss will cause you."

Elfin may be right, he thought to himself, but a sense of real loss was slowly engulfing him. Now he understood why those faces meant something to him and why he'd felt so nostalgic; they were

part of his hidden past. They were people he'd cared for and loved, and now they were all dead. Telly began to understand the implications of what Elfin said. He and the others were part of a greater picture and would all live again and again for - forever! Was this possible? The very prospect of eternity without end was terrifying. Would he ever meet those lost souls again, and would any of them recognize one another?

When Elfin introduced him to Phel, he hadn't asked any questions, especially the one that formed in his mind when he looked at Phel's strange eyes. He knew those eyes from somewhere, but he couldn't remember where.

During the past six years, Phel and Telly had been roommates at the G.C.C. Naval College, and trained together. They weren't only drinking buddies, but also close friends. Yet, for all their friendship and closeness of quarters, there was very little about Phel that Telly really knew or understood. Oh, he'd learned about Phel's family on Thebel, how he decided to make a career of the navy and many of his habits . . . but there was something missing, something that bothered him. It was like being with someone he recognized from the past but wasn't sure about. He just couldn't put the matter out of his mind.

So then, there was that pressing question which could, for some reason or other, never be asked. Phel was never actually secretive about his private life, but there was a reserve in him that Telly always felt he should never intrude upon.

He wondered if Phel had the same feelings and questions he did, but never thought the time was right to ask him. It could be that subconsciously, he didn't really want to know the answers. Now the time and place appeared to be right and for some reason, his reservations seemed unimportant.

Somehow Chevoni's songs, and the mood they cast over him, changed everything. He knew this was the time.

Telly worked up his courage. "Phel," he blurted out. "Damn it, there's something that's been bothering me ever since I met you back at Haronel. I . . ." this wasn't coming out well at all, "it's your eyes . . . I've seen them before . . . I mean, just where have I met you before?"

He held his breath in anticipation, waiting to hear what Phel would say. It seemed like an eternity as he sat and wondered if Phel would ever respond.

Phel sipped at his ale, seeming not to hear the question. Then, setting his glass on the table, he looked straight into Telly's eyes. Telly nearly became lost in the deep emotionless stare that didn't seem human. Phel was an otherwise insignificant looking fellow, except for his light blue skin, of course, and it was his odd eyes alone that stood out and captured everyone's attention.

"So you finally recognize me, Telakin B'Mesziah. After all this time"

Telly could no longer see Phel's face, only his strangely soft, calm eyes. And now Phel's voice had a different quality to it, almost haunting and feminine . . . not anything like he was used to hearing.

"Your mother, Jennanine B'Mesziah, was my best friend long ago before the Great Cataclysm. You were a young man then when you met me back in 6187-7N5 at Styx Able IV Naval Station . . . that was shortly before you were killed in action out on the rim."

Phel paused for what seemed an eternity before continuing. "You knew me as Miriam B'Mesziah. Now, let things be for awhile, and sometime in the future we'll discuss this again."

He abruptly turned away from Telly and concentrated his attention on Chevoni.

Phel knew Telly would recognize him sooner or later, but was still surprised that it happened here and now. This was neither the time nor place for such a conversation. He wanted time to think about how to discuss the subject with Telly.

He was extremely fond of the young man, not only because he was a drinking buddy, but also because he was Jenn's son. There'd been an immediate affinity between Miriam and Telly when they'd first met at Styx Able IV, before the conflagration, and now it had grown into a solid friendship between the two of them. Both Raphael and Miriam considered disclosing their joint identity to Telly, but didn't consider the time to be right; now the young elf broached the subject for them.

Phel enjoyed having a male body again and experiencing all the pleasures and pains of being a young man. His whole attitude towards life had changed since that fateful day he'd merged with the stricken elf-child on Borgdragon Estate's foul playground. His mission was salvaged by the terrified child and he'd come to love the innocent soul with whom he would forever share eternity. The merging of the other souls into his then new binary, added a

fantastic dimension to his understanding of both himself and of all humanity. If only he could find a way to share some of this wonderful and intimate knowledge with Telly. It would be a real blessing for the young man. The moment would come and he'd bide his time until he and Miriam thought Telly was ready.

When Telly finally came back to his senses, Phel was back watching Chevoni perform, sipping at his ale as if nothing happened. Had anything actually been said, or was Telly hallucinating? He looked down at his own ale and shook his head.

Telly sat reflecting on what he'd heard for a time, not knowing what to say. So he said nothing.

In his mind he had a thousand and one questions to ask Phel, but knew his friend couldn't be rushed and had his reasons for not discussing the subject now. He'd have to be patient and wait.

After her performance, Chevoni wound her way through the tables and made for the table where Phel and Telly were sitting. Telly was surprised out of his thoughts by her approach. Why was she coming to this corner of the room? Only he and Phel were sitting here.

"Hi," she laughed in her light musical voice. "I'm Chevoni B'Seraph. I don't recall ever seeing you two here before, a Tachalet and an Elf at that!"

Both young men rose to their feet, bowing courteously, and introduced themselves. After inviting Chevoni to join them, all three sat down.

Telly was impressed by the aura of mysticism and maturity around her. Close up, her eyes appeared to be more beautiful and brightly faceted than before. "Do you work here often?" he asked, nearly at a loss for words.

"Whenever I'm off-duty," she replied. "Since music's my first love, I like to indulge my fancies for pleasing an audience whenever I can. And, uh, I forgot to mention that I'm Senior-Captain B'Seraph from 13th Fleet Admiralty."

Telly's face registered astonishment briefly. She seemed so frail he'd never considered her as being a high-ranking officer, much less in the navy. The idea of Chevoni dressed in a slate-gray uniform seemed too much to believe.

She paused, staring at Phel for a long moment. Phel, who calmly sipped his ale, signaled for another, and returned her appraising stare.

"Don't I know you from somewhere, Lieutenant?"

Phel smiled a little, a smile that lit up his plain face, and answered her in a language unknown to Telly. Oddly, his voice seemed to become feminine again, with a strange quality to it. Chevoni laughed, answering back in the same language.

Telly felt out of place, somewhat like an outsider. As Phel and Chevoni talked, he suspected they had something in common that excluded him, or they knew one another from some other place. He was uncomfortable at that point, and Phel, sensing his feelings, proceeded to draw him into their conversation.

"What we were discussing was that it certainly is a small galaxy," Phel said, laughing to himself. "First you recognize me, Telly, and now Chevoni, here, compounds my problems. Why don't we go back to ground zero and start all over again. I'm Lieutenant B'Thebel, and. . . ." They all laughed and dropped the subject.

After a few more moments, Phel asked Chevoni if she would sing a certain song; he'd already asked her in her own language, a few minutes earlier, but asked again in Galactic Common so Telly would understand. Chevoni nodded, and picking up her stringed Strassa, returned to the stage, where she began with a melody so hauntingly familiar that Telly nearly felt sick to his stomach with nostalgia. His mother used to sing that song for him as a lullaby before he went to sleep, his mother? Now what made him think of that? He couldn't remember his mother at all. How could he know what she sang to him?

After singing several more of her lovely songs, Chevoni returned to their table and the three talked together for several hours.

During the next two weeks, Telly spent many pleasant hours with Chevoni, whenever she was off-duty. They discussed her songs and her far-off world of origin. Telly learned about her extreme lightness in density, and in so doing recognized why she wore such heavy-looking boots and a weighted belt when off-duty.

One evening, as he lay in bed thinking, Telly realized that he was really fond of Chevoni. In fact, he loved her in a way he couldn't put into words, but understood as a fulfilling balance to his very being. It was rewarding to just spend time with Chevoni, to be in the same room with her and to be close to her.

For some reason he felt he'd always known Chevoni, even though they'd only met a short time ago. He wondered if she was also someone from out of his hidden past, or if there was some

special reason for his feelings toward her. All he knew was that he enjoyed having her for a friend and believed she felt the same about him. Chevoni seemed to understand him as a man, and he felt comfortable with her.

The following evening, he showed her his treasured volume of Telenji's poems that Heide had given to him. She pointed out that many of her songs were renditions of those very poems and others by different poets. She seemed strangely drawn to Alsis Jeffnel's signature at the beginning of the book, just above Heide's note to Telly.

"Do you recognize the name?" Telly asked.

"Which one do you mean?"

"The top one."

"Oh, yes. I knew Alsis a long time ago. Before. . ."

"Before what?"

"Please, let's not talk about it. That was a terrible time I don't want to bring back to the surface."

He wanted to pursue the subject, but didn't want to upset her. The name was familiar to him, but he couldn't remember from where. Chevoni was the first person with whom he'd discussed this book, and her obvious knowledge of its former owner, Alsis Jeffnel, intrigued him.

"As you wish, Chevoni," he replied, realizing there were more secrets here. Secrets that weren't desirable to talk about. Who ever this Alsis Jeffnel was, she evoked a sad memory for Chevoni, and Telly figured they must have been close at one time.

After a few days, Phel received final confirmation of his orders and shipped out. He and Chevoni went off together for a private talk, although this was never a topic of conversation between her and Telly. Then he and Phel went out for a last night on the town, and parted.

There were times during the past two weeks that Telly wanted to put his fist through the nearest wall; everything was happening so fast, and he felt he was missing the real significance of affairs. There was so little he knew about Phel, or was it Miriam? Would he ever see him again, and if so, would he remember?

Phel was really an enigma to Telly, and he thought about asking Chevoni about him, since she seemed to be an old acquaintance of his. Neither he nor Phel discussed the matter of

their joint past and now that he was gone, it was questionable whether or not they'd ever meet again.

He was still confused as to who Miriam was. Somehow, though, he realized that both Phel and Miriam were tied together somewhere in his past, but the pieces still wouldn't come together. At times Phel would give him hints and then drop the subject, leaving him hanging. He wondered if Chevoni had any of the answers, but after some deliberation, decided to drop the matter and take things as they came.

Now what of Chevoni? Telly didn't want to lose her either. That had happened too often already. She'd become a strong force in his life, someone who made him feel complete and whole. There seemed to be no way to resolve that situation; not only because she was a senior officer, but also because he had the drive to continue on with the pathfinders and to grow in his own naval career.

He was now beginning to understand just what Heide and Elfin meant when they counseled him about the terribly high price of temporal experience; it would never be easy. He'd have to be patient. If and when the time was right, either Phel or Chevoni would talk to him; he was sure of that. He remembered when Elfin cautioned him about being patient, so patient he would be.

Telly's dilemma ended when his orders assigning him to the pathfinder corps academy finally arrived. He'd be assigned to one of the main branches, at Tuckomay-Brit's Jelicolm B-2 Intensive Training Center, and would be out of contact with Chevoni - or anyone else - for at least ten years.

Chevoni accompanied him to the spaceport, driving him in a two-passenger ground car. Along the way, they talked about the future and Telly's new career in the pathfinder corps. Chevoni had only one bit of advice about this.

"Telly, you'll always be hard-pressed to achieve your maximum endurance and to keep your mind and spirit attuned to the demands of your profession at all times. There's an old saying that goes: warriors are no longer needed when the war is ended. This is never true. You see, for us the war with the black ones may never end . . . at least not in the foreseeable future. I think your choice of the pathfinders is a wise one and that you'll grow with them into a mature and responsible human being, but you must rely on your endurance at all times to succeed. Never give up under any circumstances."

When they arrived at the spaceport, which in Telly's opinion was far too soon, Chevoni parked her car in the flag officer's parking lot. Then, turning to Telly, she looked at him for a long time. Finally, she seemed to reach a conclusion.

"Telly, I know you're aware of how things are with respect to Phel and me," she said softly. "And I know the details of our personalities are confusing for you, especially Raphael's."

Telly nodded in agreement. "I've given a good deal of thought to the matter, but I don't think I have the right to pry into your personal affairs."

"You're a prudent and intelligent young man, Telly," she smiled. That was curious because Telly didn't feel like much of either. All he felt at the moment was a growing sense of loss and sadness at the prospects of being separated from his friends.

Chevoni continued. "And I have very deep feelings for you I can't remember ever feeling for another man. So far, I've never misjudged a person, and I feel as close to you as if you were a part of me. Because of this, I'm entrusting you with a secret. A secret which has much to do with your past and your future," She paused and looked at her wristwatch.

"First, Raphael is strange to you because he's a part of a complex personality which we call a Magum. That is, a personality made up of ten separate human souls and he's a very powerful and important member of our Nashramh Sisterhood. Oh yes, I too am a Nashramh Sister, but then I think you knew that all along."

Telly nodded. Elfin had discussed the existence of binary personalities with him before, and although he still didn't understand very much about them, he was aware of their existence. And, yes, he really should have known that Chevoni was a Nashramh Sister, although he'd never thought about it. But what he heard next surprised him.

"Of the ten, Raphael is the only male personality; the rest are women . . . two are elfin, like you, and two are Seraphim like me. And there are others, just as I am and you will be one day."

Telly was speechless; he'd grown up with the Nashramh and considered himself as part of them, but it never occurred to him that Phel and Chevoni were part of the sisterhood. But, then, it really made sense once he thought about it.

Now it dawned on him why Elfin introduced him to Phel. She knew they were destined to be tied together. Yes, it did make

sense. He still didn't understand Chevoni, but felt that in time this too would make sense.

"Yes," Chevoni continued, "you too are special to our order and will always be one of us." Telly was surprised that she knew about his background since he never discussed it with anyone, not even Phel.

"You see, Telly, you are truly special to us, and that's why I've entrusted you with this secret. You will meet Raphael again and he'll tell you much more, but only when you're ready to hear it. I don't mean to sound cryptic, but there are sound reasons for it. You've been told, in the past, that it isn't wise to learn certain things before you're ready for them. That's why Phel decided against talking to you just now. He's really doing you a favor. Any discussions he'd have with you now would only make things difficult for your future actions. I hope you trust the two of us in this."

She leaned over and kissed Telly on the mouth. "We'd better get our cans moving or you'll miss your ship."

Telly nodded silently. Now his dreams and obscure memories seemed to take on a new meaning and make more sense.

"God," he thought to himself, "I have a lot to learn, and I don't have the slightest idea of where to begin."

Chapter 6

Reunion

Memories of lives past is a bittersweet experience for all of us . . . but, what happens when we unite with someone we've known before . . . do we always recognize them?

04:00-10 MAREN 8296-7N5

Jennanine B'Mesziah sat alone on a couch, staring out of the passenger lounge's viewport at the brilliantly sparkling starfields. The clear crystal reflected her face, and the distant stars shining through and superimposed on her image, dimly reminded her of a song she had once heard.

Jenn, a Meszian Middle Elf, was 79 years old, with at least seven more centuries of life ahead of her. She was short and slender, being less than a meter and a half tall, and appeared to be more a child than an adult woman. Her sweet face was slightly round and sensitive-looking, with large sad green eyes and dimples at the corners of her mouth. Her dark shining green hair was parted to one side and swept back loosely. Jenn had just completed a 55 year course of studies at the Ambernolt-Brit Academy for Advanced Naval Astronautics, where she majored in group-G sub-space communications and class four military linguistics and codes. Oddly enough, the courses, which were highly advanced, were easy for her to both grasp and to comprehend, especially the enemy's alien Borg language and its two sub-tongues.

She was now en route to Sagbond Station IV, where she would begin her first assignment as a Sister-Propser. She'd spend her first five years there as an advanced graduate student at the Masterbrook College of Communications Sciences, then transferred to the Sisterhood's Embassy as a crypto-analyst. For now, she was a passenger on the sisterhood scout-freighter 'SF Lysallyn-Vee', which lay still in temporal space awaiting a rendezvous with the Starliner Supreme G.C.C. 'Spiral Lance'. Jenn smiled happily to herself. She'd heard all sorts of great stories about the giant starliners and their wonderful entertainments, and looked forward to the voyage on this one, which had everything, including parks.

The parks teemed with thousands of colorful birds and furry little creatures that were ever so friendly. Then there were the great zoos inhabited by strange and exotic animals from all over the galaxy. She wondered if there'd be a Mnemex on the Spiral Lance. This terrible and wondrous creature had always fascinated her when she read about it back at Ling Wall. She had a strange sensation that she'd already seen a real live Mnemex before, especially when she first looked at a full-color picture of one of the ugly beasts. Ever since then she'd been curious to see a Mnemex. Well then, maybe she would.

Sitting alone, her forehead wrinkled in thought, Jenn contemplated the shimmering cosmos. Something haunted her about looking at the beautiful, glittering starfields through her own reflected image, something which stirred hidden feelings and memories. This made her feel as she had during her childhood at Ling Wall, bringing back all her thoughts and . . . no, she couldn't quite catch it. But for a moment, it seemed she was a child again, with an unbounded imagination in which seemingly familiar faces appeared to her.

Suddenly a song echoed in her mind . . . how did it go? Something about a smile behind the looking glass . . . the one that Miriam used to sing.

Miriam? Who was Miriam? A nurse she used to have? No, that didn't sound right, then who? That name had popped into her head before, but she could never quite attach a face to it. A distant figure would loom behind a tree; a subtle scent would seem all too familiar. Then it left just as quickly before she grasped it. Sometimes she'd see something and think, "Miriam would like that." But who was Miriam?

Jenn suddenly felt her stomach churning with the beginning of a deep-seated sense of intense nostalgia she didn't understand and which nearly engulfed her entire being. Then, feeling weak, she decided to return to her cabin and lie down for awhile. She'd experienced feelings like this before, but never so strongly. They occurred after she awakened from a dream and was trying to remember what it was about. It never occurred while she was awake and it scared the daylights out of her.

Once in her room, Jenn sank into a fitful doze filled with conflicting images.

A small flame, nearly spent and extinguished, flickered into a growing light. At intervals it seemed to fade a little, then, brightened again.

Jennanine B'Meszhiah was born on the moon colony of the Hedol Mining Complex in the system Cortex 4510B on the fifth day of MAREN 8217-7N5. She had never seen her parents, for she'd been taken as an infant and relocated by the sisterhood, to the Ling Wall Academy for Girls. She'd spent her entire childhood at the school and was happy and active there. Even now, all her best memories and senses of nostalgia usually pointed at Ling Wall. If she didn't feel so compelled to study and use communications, she'd liked to be positioned at the carefree girls' school where she felt most at home.

Jenn had many special friends at the Academy, and made it a point to know everything and everybody there. Jenn wasn't a snoop or a gossip, but rather a typical elf who wanted to know exactly what was going on at all times. She was definitely a social creature who enjoyed dealing with all of her classmates. Many of the girls didn't know who Jenn was, but she knew each of them. Instead of reading the bulletin board in the main dining hall, the girls usually asked Jenn what was playing at the theater, and who was performing, or what parties were being planned.

Jenn especially loved the endless hours of wandering around the academy's extensive grounds. Even after all these long years she could remember the lovely facets of nature she'd studied. It seemed that most of her childhood was spent in the forest of great knotty trees with their high, waving leaves, the bright flowers which grew everywhere, and the vast array of friendly little animals peeking out from behind every tree, plant, and stone.

Her favorite place, however, was her secret 'thinking pond', which seemed so familiar and personal. It's clear, rippling green water served almost as a mirror for Jenn's thoughts from her first memory of the place, through her childhood years, and up to her last days there.

Then there was her favorite tree, which caught her attention as the only familiar thing in sight when she'd first arrived at Ling Wall. Why this was so she could never say, but it was. It was such a very old tree, like an old man who had so much character, with its heavy gnarled branches reaching up towards the clouds. Yes, her wonderful tree reminded her of a very old man who had seen everything that ever happened, and who was resigned to whatever fate had in store for him. She loved to climb up and sit on its strong branches. She always felt comfortable there, looking at the wonderful view of Ling Wall Academy that was so quiet and peaceful from so high above.

Jenn knew she shouldn't have done it, but she carved her name on the tree in great big letters next to someone else who also had the same name - Jenn. She'd often wondered about the other Jenn who'd carved her name on the tree so long, long ago and felt compelled to put her own name next to it. It seemed that the great old tree was something they both shared in common.

Sometimes, when she was playing alone in the woods with her make-believe friends, Jenn saw faces peeking out from behind the trees, smiling at her and beckoning her to come and play. They looked so familiar to her, but she couldn't remember seeing any of them in her classes or on the playground. She wanted to get to know them but they'd always disappear when she walked over to them. She never thought about it, but it was at those times when the name of Miriam and hints of that strange song had first struck her. After a while, she wondered if they were real or just figments of her imagination.

When she graduated from Ling Wall Academy, she transferred to the Westwind Liberal Arts College for five years before choosing her field of specialization. Her counselors always emphasized that a girl should take several years of liberal arts to shop around, instead of locking herself in on a single career track after graduation from primary studies. This proved to be good advice, although Jenn had always been drawn towards linguistics and communication systems.

Music and dancing were Jenn's real love, although her voice wasn't especially good for singing. Some of her favorite artists and composers were from the Seraphim, of whom her best friend and confidante, Chevolanoe, was a member. The tinkling chimes and flowing tones from their stringed instruments were absolute paradise to her ears.

Of course, Jenn's favorite paintings were by an artist who'd visited her home world of Mesziah. He captured the grand mountains that took her breath away when she looked at them, and then there were those other, almost mystic paintings of the forested river deltas. Whenever she saw these enchanting works, which she just knew were real, her heart would race with a happy elation that only a true native of those glowing forest streams could feel.

Then there were all the great stories about winged faeries and elves on her far-off home world of Mesziah that made her laugh and giggle. In fact, Jenn liked all the stories she read or heard, unless they had overtones of things that were cruel or frightening.

She never remembered being on her world of origin, but never tired of learning as much about it as she could. She really felt she knew what the place was like and whenever she met someone who'd been there, she'd find some way of getting them aside and would pump them for stories of their experiences. One of her goals for the future was to visit that wonderful world of Mesziah.

Jenn's life, as far as she was concerned, was happy from the beginning of her first awareness in the children's nursery at Ling Wall through her college years at Westwind. Jenn always made friends easily and enjoyed her schooling, which promised new adventures on far away worlds for the best students, and Jenn was one of the best.

Only these occasional naggings of nostalgia bothered her, taking her out of the warm security and familiarity of her life and friendships to a level on which she felt some-how apart. She would suddenly stare at the stars in the night sky and know, in the back of her mind and with a cold, haunting certainty that she was special and destined to travel among these stars. She knew she belonged to the sisterhood, even as a small child before she'd taken the tests to enter the order. These strange and almost unreal senses would occasionally engulf her, now even more frequently than before, and they would just as quickly flee, so she could

submerge herself in her own reality again. Yet something in her inner mind prodded at her, causing her to work hard to stop playing and procrastinating all the time, and to devote herself to her studies. This effort took a lot of self-discipline - for any kind of Meszian elf.

Then there were things in her dreams that upset her, but which she could never quite remember when waking up. The blurred images of a rag doll; was it 'Red'? No, it wasn't Red, maybe . . . foggy, dark, warm rain, sand, and loneliness, then nothing.

Sister Frans Obpel, her counselor, told her not to worry about the dreams or to think about them, since they were normal and would come to the surface when the time was right. Now, when she looked out through the crystal portal at the cold starfields reflected through her own image, Jenn's innermost memories began to awaken, revealing things long-hidden in the recesses of her subconscious mind.

The crystal lens seemed to act as a mirror, somewhat like her secret thinking pond, but much stronger. She remembered looking out at these same starfields a long time ago. But she had never been in space like this before; despite that, these stars seemed so familiar.

She felt shivers racing up and down her spine. Something important was going to happen - she just knew it!

As she lay down on her soft bed, her bags already packed for the transfer in the estimated three or so days, Jenn's stomach had an odd lump in it. It was like when she'd known one of her friends was dying, yet not quite the same. It was a lump like she had when she'd first arrived at Ambernolt-Brit Academy 55 years ago; it seemed that her whole body was out of sorts as she tried to rest and suppress her threatening nausea. Back at Ambernolt-Brit, the oddly soft and deep eyes of the Sisters-Magum had caused her this terrible feeling, although she wasn't sure what it was at the time.

*The flame, which had darkened, flickered into life again,
shining strongly with a pure, wholesome glow.*

Jenn snapped awake with a start, her skin crawling and goose flesh forming on her arms and legs. The face was so real, and the soft, calm eyes looked right into her very soul . . . the eyes of a Sister-Magum! At first they were the eyes of a little girl, then of a woman, but whom?

Jenn sat huddled, alone in the dimly lit room, shivering and trying to remember . . . it was important that she remember something that was frustratingly out of reach. Just like all the times when she was a kid, by her pond, her tree, or looking up at the stars during a cool evening. But this time she didn't want to let go. She had to find out what was the matter with her.

There it was . . . it was happening again, that intense sense of nostalgia in the pit in her stomach. What was happening to her?

Those soft, calm eyes. She focused her mind on them and her body shivered with excitement.

She could almost see them now, soft and glowing. Now she remembered . . . Miriam!

Suddenly, memories flooded to the surface, as if a dam had just broken, overwhelming her with their intensity. In an instant she was living another life, and Jenn now lay back on her bed, in a near daze, remembering other places, other times and . . . the dark beach with relentless, warm rain . . . her nose broken and her teeth knocked out . . . and her memories returned.

She remembered the last moments of her past life first, then, her memories flooded back in episodes that were in reverse order to actual events. She remembered being in space, back with Neftalak when her children were young, her happy life at Ling Wall Academy, and finally her first memories on the Hamonak space freighter 'Louufen' with her soft loving mother. It seemed funny, but she couldn't actually remember what her mother looked like, but she knew it was her mother. The aching in her stomach was replaced by tears . . . tears of pent-up anxiety finally being released with the memory of who she truly was. There wasn't anything wrong with her, just memories.

"Oh, God," she spoke aloud. "I remember you, Miriam. I really do remember it all . . . yes, when I first saw you by the pond and I was too shy to talk. We were next to the pond, the same one I loved so much at Ling Wall's summer camp . . . and you knew about everything. And . . . and my doll's name was Ginger, not Red!

"Oh, yes . . . my favorite tree! My name on the tree . . . the other Jenn . . . the other Jenn was me! I wrote my name on the tree a long time ago, and again this time."

Jenn sat rocking back and forth on her bed, remembering her past like a motion picture crystal being played in front of her mind's eye. But she was the only spectator in the audience, unable

to leave until the show was over. Then she finally dropped off into a fitful sleep, exhausted by the released emotions of the past few hours.

Three days later, Jenn left the SF Lysallyn-Vee and boarded the Starliner Supreme, G.C.C. 'Spiral Lance'. After clearing customs and registering with the purser, she took a robo-cab to her new living complex, some 24 kilometers away. When she arrived, she found her own room in a large complex bordering a lovely park area. She would be one of 14 Nashramh Sisters sharing the apartment complex.

This leg of her journey would last 28 months - lots of time to reflect on her newfound memories.

Jenn remembered them all . . . Miriam, Neftalak, Eaun, Neferah, Telakin and her beautiful little girl, Myrnah.

It was Eaun who'd beat her up and called her a germ. Yes a germ! Neftalak was gentle and handsome . . . and he'd been so weak around other women, but, then Kin was something else . . . she'd nearly died when she heard of his being killed in battle. Jenn remembered them all. Myrnah, whom they'd named after Neftalak's mother lying in her crib so peaceful, her little thumb corked in her mouth.

What happened to Myrnah? Did she grow up to become a beautiful young woman? Did she marry or join the sisterhood like her mother? There were so many unanswered questions.

Jenn remembered sending Myrnah to Ling Wall and the sisterhood after Kin died and Neftalak left for the battle. "Maybe," she spoke aloud to herself, "I can go back to Ling Wall and find out about my little girl! Yes, I can do that. Oh, yes, I can do that before I die again."

The memories nearly broke her heart. It was almost worse to remember her distant past than to have it remain hidden. When she couldn't remember what she'd lost, there was no reason to mourn. Now Jenn came to see the wonderful things long lost to time, and it was hard to realize they'd never happen again, that she would never see any of those wonderful people again.

There was the memory of the crash and the death of her friends . . . then, the long and terrible loneliness in the cave. Yet no memory was fonder and more painful than that of Miriam.

Did Miriam made it back, or had she died in the void like so many others? Again, there were so many unanswered questions.

"Oh, God," she thought. "Everyone I've ever loved has disappeared forever and I'll never know what happened to any of them."

The sisters aboard the Spiral Lance were cordial and friendly, but Jenn realized that they couldn't help. This was something she alone would have to deal with.

She remembered a conversation with Miriam long ago. Yes, Miriam was a Magum . . . she'd forgotten all about that. Miriam had told Jenn about her own memories from previous lives - like when she'd been Smon. Maybe this was what Miriam was talking about. There was so much to remember.

* * *

A soft breeze rustled through dry yellow and orange leaves that decorated the autumn day as Raphael strolled casually along a tree-lined path. The campus was almost deserted now that the festival days were beginning, and he had time to be alone with his private thoughts. New classes would commence in two weeks. Masterbrook College of Communications Sciences would be hectic as usual, with no time for reflection or private interludes without crowds of students occupying every available space.

It was good to be assigned to a school again. The youthful energies of eager students made him feel young, and their enthusiasm always rubbed off on him. The autumn colors comforted him as he walked through fading flower gardens, past small pools and hidden benches.

Raphael stopped and watched a girl sitting by herself at the edge of a fishpond, stirring the water with a long twig. She was busy having a happy conversation with herself. It reminded him of something out of the past. Her little form seemed familiar; he listened carefully but the girl's words were barely audible. On an impulse, he walked over to her and asked her if she was a student here.

The little girl - no, a young-looking elf woman - smiled up at him and replied that she'd been here for two years, and yes, she was a student.

"Well then my dear, may I introduce myself," he laughed, "I'm Raphael B'Thebel and I too have been studying here for the past six months. You seem familiar to me, though I don't believe we've met before."

The young woman got to her feet and bowed slightly, in the way of the Nashramh, saying sweetly, "I'm Jennanine B'Meszhiah, good sir, and I'm very pleased to meet you."

Raphael stood mutely and stared at this small elf that he'd been searching ever since the cataclysm had taken her. His sweet little Jenn had been found at last.

Why hadn't Ruby told him? She knew he and Miriam were searching for Jenn and were obsessed with finding her. He felt a terrible sense of anger welling up inside him for an instant . . . was this a cruel joke? Then, calming himself, Raphael realized that Ruby and Council Central must have had a reason for not telling him. He would ask later. Now it wasn't important. He had found Jenn, and that was what really mattered.

"Is something wrong?" Jenn asked her eyes wide and looking confused. "I didn't say anything wrong, did I?"

"Have you had lunch yet?" Raphael asked, laughing, "And no, you most certainly haven't said anything wrong. It's just that you're the first elf I've met here, and you're a lovely elf at that!"

Jenn couldn't believe this handsome guy would ask her for a date when they'd just met. In fact, she'd never met anyone like him before. But, his eyes seemed familiar.

"Well, how about it? We can go over to the student canteen and get acquainted. Maybe you can tell me about Meszhiah and I can tell you about my home world."

"If you really want to," Jenn replied hesitantly, "but I really don't know you."

"True, but we can overcome that over a nice lunch and some spiced tea."

"Well, okay. But I don't really understand what you find so interesting about me. I'm not really that smart."

"All elves are smart, Jenn, and you're also very beautiful. I'm surprised that you aren't surrounded by a crowd of male admirers. But then, it is festival time isn't it?"

They walked to the cafeteria and found a table near the window. Raphael discovered that Jenn was a Middle Elf and had never been on Meszhiah before. She was fascinated by this wonderful man. He seemed to know all about her and everything else, for that matter. He was so familiar that she felt they'd known each other forever.

"I'll bet that you like green bean and broadleaf salad with nuts and berries on it," Raphael laughed as they looked over the menu.

"And, let me see, you also like any kind of dessert, especially if it has ginnmallows in it, right?"

"How did you know that?" Jenn asked in amazement.

"Just a lucky guess," he grinned happily.

Raphael noticed with pleasure that her eating habits hadn't changed much at all, and she still retained all of her elfish characteristics. Jenn still had her peculiar way of lining up her nuts in neat little rows and rearranging the different vegetables on her plate into specific patterns before nibbling away at them. She accomplished this in a haphazard fashion, although she always saved the best for last. However, she didn't take as long to eat as before, and this was a definite improvement.

Their lunch was not only good, but it was an occasion to be remembered. They'd talked about all sorts of things, although Raphael was careful not to mention the Nashramh or anything from the past. This could come out at some future time, when Jenn was prepared for it. Jenn, a little less tactful, wanted to know if he was married or had any regular girlfriends.

"Neither," Raphael responded seriously. "I'm afraid I have bad breath or warts. Girls all run the other direction when I come into sight. All of them except for beautiful elves who are tolerant of such lowlifes as myself."

At first Jenn thought he was serious, then, laughed happily when she realized he was only kidding.

She hadn't been that interested in guys, with all her studies and stuff, and usually not guys like him. He was serious, and smart, although he continued with his light-hearted bantering. Even physically, he wouldn't have interested her. But his eyes, his beautiful soft eyes, seemed to know everything. They made her feel safe and comfortable. If not for his eyes, with their familiarity and warmth, she might never have given him a second thought.

Now, she didn't want to lose this wonderful man. She was trying to figure out how to see him again when he asked her out for dinner that evening. Without hesitation, she agreed and nailed him down to the exact time and place. She wasn't taking any chances. Later, when Raphael walked her home to her apartment, Jenn had decided that she was going to marry this man with those deep mysterious eyes and wonderful sense of humor. She would beat up any germ who tried to get him away from her. That was for sure.

They met for dinner that evening and every evening thereafter. Jenn just couldn't see enough of Raphael and made no secret of it. She described him in glowing terms to her roommate, Quorib B'Nussoh, as being real tall, at least two meters, which he wasn't, with light blue skin, deep blue hair, and the most beautiful blue eyes she'd ever seen. "And," she emphasized, "He's so intelligent and gentle that I can't get over it." She also warned Quorib against trying to steal him when they were introduced.

Quorib B'Nussoh met Raphael on the third day after he and Jenn began dating. She too was amazed by the odd familiarity of his strange blue eyes, but couldn't quite place where she'd seen them before. She agreed that Jenn would be foolish to let him go, explaining that the two of them were made for one another. This only reinforced Jenn's resolve to marry him since, although she couldn't explain why, she felt a deep love for him almost from the moment they'd met by the fishpond.

Jenn felt she'd been searching for Raphael all her life, or someone like him, even though she hadn't been aware of it. Now that she'd met him, she realized he was a very important part of her life. He seemed to balance her.

"You know, honey," Jenn said thoughtfully, looking up into Raphael's deep blue eyes. "I just can't get over the feeling that I've known you from somewhere else. You're so familiar, but I know I've never seen you before. It's funny, but Quorib feels the same way.

"I feel so comfortable with you that I can tell you anything about myself and know you'll understand my feelings and not be critical of me. I know I can trust you even though I've known you for only a short time. I've never felt this way about anyone before in my whole life."

Raphael studied Jenn's soft little hand, seeming not to hear her statement. Then after a long pause, he looked up and kissed her.

"Oh, we have surely met before, Jenn, you, me, and Quorib. Only it was a long time ago before you were born as a Middle Elf. In time you will remember."

Jenn was shocked. He knew about her memories.

"What are you talking about, Raphael? What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"That's something you can answer yourself, Jenn. You can remember my eyes, or at least someone with the same kind of eyes. You do remember, don't you?"

Jenn couldn't believe what she was hearing. Raphael was someone from out of her past? Was he really part of her secret memories? This very idea frightened her and made her look away.

"Shall we change the subject, Jenn?"

"No!" she shook her head frantically, "I don't want to change the subject. I . . . I just don't know what to think or what to say, but I . . . I have haunting memories. Or, at least I think they're memories."

"Are they about people who cause you to feel sad?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you tell me about them, Jenn, maybe it would help you remember?"

Jenn didn't know exactly why, but she really trusted Raphael. She needed to tell him about her memories. She described her little girl with sad eyes, and the two handsome men who were elves. She remembered all their names; Myrnah, Telakin, Neftalak, Eaun, and Neferah went with their faces. And then there was a huge black thing that always crept into her memories and scared the daylights out of her. It was so black and ominous. It was somehow alive, but also dead.

Then there were those soft eyes that were like Raphael's, and the words to a song about the smile behind the looking glass that brought to mind the name of Miriam, her best friend. She went on to describe places and things, one of which was called a Mnemex.

She felt so relieved to get it all out in the open at last. Maybe Raphael could help her put it into perspective, and help her figure out what it all meant. She hadn't felt close to anyone since Miriam. Not even Neftalak could fill the gap Miriam left. She'd really loved Neftalak, but it wasn't the same kind of special love or bond she had with Miriam.

Miriam seemed to complete Jenn, and make her feel alive. Jenn loved Neftalak almost as if he was a part of her, but somehow Miriam overshadowed everything.

Raphael smiled and placed his hand under her chin, tilting her face up towards his.

"Look at my eyes closely, Jenn, and try to imagine that they are a deep red and that I'm an elf."

"Your eyes are like Miriam's," she whispered, "just like Miriam's used to look."

"I am Miriam, Jenn."

"I don't understand. You're Raphael, and you're a man."

"Yes I am Raphael, but I'm also Miriam and I left you on a lifeboat out beyond the rim when our ship, the Whisper, was damaged beyond repair. And that huge black thing you dream of was a warship, from beyond our galaxy, which was from Adam Belial's invasion fleet. When you first saw it emerging into our temporal space you fainted and then panicked. I had to take you to our cabin and help you understand what was really going on."

Jenn had tears in her eyes as she remembered their parting from the Whisper. "You said you'd never leave me alone," she sobbed.

"Yes, and this time I won't let anything break my promise, Jenn."

"Do you have any idea of what happened to me, Raphael? It was horrible. I was all alone. All the others were killed when we crashed into the sea. Only I made it to shore. It would probably have been better if I'd died with them, but I was left all alone. I tried to do everything right. I really did. I remembered all the things you taught me to do if I were ever to get lost on a strange world so I could survive. I even built a marker with stones shaped like a triangle, just like you said, with an arrow pointing towards where the Clunk sank. Then I waited, hoping you would come and find me, but you never did . . . nobody did . . . so I was all alone."

Jenn's eyes had filled with tears as she related her grief. "Sometimes I pretended that you and Neferah were there, and for a while it made things better . . . but then I got sick. I guess I died because I don't remember much after that. Oh, Raphael, I hope you keep your promise. I don't ever want to be alone like that again . . . I was so scared and lonely."

"You won't be, this I vow," Raphael spoke softly as he held her in his arms, "and, I'm proud of you Jenn." His voice became more like Miriam's as he continued. "You did everything right. If it hadn't been for the marker you built, our agents could never have found the Clunk and the rest of the crew. You did your job well and everyone has been found. Now let's not have any more tears, Jenn, it's all behind us and we have a whole new future to build. I'll help you deal with your memories and answer any questions you have . . . you have only to ask."

By the end of spring, Raphael and Jenn decided to marry. Ruby agreed to the arrangement but never said why she hadn't told

Raphael that Jenn had been found. He thought about it for awhile and concluded it was for the best. The fact that both Jenn and Quorib were assigned to the same school as he had was no accident. This he knew.

Now that he and Jenn were back together, Raphael and Miriam were faced with the same kind of problems that Ruby and Council Central had dealt with. Just how much should he tell Jenn at any given time? Some things should be withheld for the present time until she was emotionally ready to accept them, such as the status of her son, Telakin. The responsibility and dangers that accompanied his special knowledge began to weigh on his mind. Now he understood just why Ruby remained silent about Jenn and Quorib.

* * *

Quorib stepped between Raphael and the door leading out of her apartment, blocking his exit.

"It is time that you, Mister Raphael B'Thebel, share with me the secret you have disclosed to my dear Jennanine. I know there is something important to my being that you are hiding from me. What is it, please?"

Standing quietly, studying the small reptilian woman, Raphael paused for a long moment, then, motioned for Quorib to sit down. "I believe you already know the answers to those questions, my dear sister," he replied with only a trace of a smile.

"I know not what it is that you are hiding," she insisted.

"Then let me offer you this, dear sister. I was your friend and communications officer on the Klikah-Lal when we discovered the derelict ship named the Tibot."

Quorib stood with her mouth hanging open, seeming to be caught in a daze, "You . . . your eyes. A Magum! Then you're . . . you're . . . Mir . . ." her voice trailed off.

"As I said, dear Sister, you already know the answer to your question."

Chapter 7

Yanna Jun

There's a time when we all have to grow up, and for Telly this came naturally. He'd always had that special quality we look for in our male counterparts, and now he was being given our greatest trust . . . a mission to capture and deliver a god . . . and something more. . . .

06:00-10 DEMIN 8303-7N5

Pathfinder-Lieutenant Telakin B'Mesziah ducked to pass through the low outer hatch of the Nashramh Scout Destroyer 'SD Yanna Jun-Lal'. Scanning the security airlock, he stepped over to the sergeant-at-arms' desk and presented his assignment disc. The hard-eyed woman behind the desk appraised him coldly, and to her left stood another grey-uniformed security guard.

Telly had never been aboard a Nashramh vessel before, and he was surprised by the seemingly cramped interior of the airlock and the small size of the ship itself. From all appearances the Yanna Jun was only some 753 meters from stem to stern, much smaller than a G.C.C. navy lifeboat. The smallest G.C.C. scoutship was 4.5 kilometers-long. This tiny warship seemed more like a mere planetary lighter by comparison.

The sergeant-at-arms, a thin-faced, unsmiling woman, calmly accepted Telly's assignment disc without comment. She checked it over in a comsat-translator mounted next to her desk. After glancing up at him for a long moment, the woman motioned Telly to the optical retina scanner at the right of her desk. "Right eye first, then left, Lieutenant."

Telly complied. Something in these women's eyes was cold and unfathomable, and he suspected that even with his entire pathfinder training and extensive combat experience, he'd be no match for them. He'd been raised by the Nashramh, and felt an affinity towards them, but he realized they too, as an organization, had their 'rough cobs' and it was best not to get on their wrong side. They'd been burned badly in the past, especially by the G.C.C., so he understood their paranoia.

Bending over the retina scanner's optical lens, he stared directly into the soft blue beam of light with each eye, wondering what it was programmed to find. The G.C.C. units compared the pattern of blood vessels in the retina and could be fooled by a special implant, but this unit seemed different in design and function. He'd been told in a briefing that the Nashramh identification system was foolproof, and had never been bypassed by anyone.

As Telly completed the retina scan, unknown to him, a uni-ven monitor scanned him for hidden weapons, poison, and other hostile devices.

"You may pass," the lean-faced woman behind the desk stated flatly. "Sister Yoab will escort you to your quarters. You will remain there until you are authorized to leave by the Captain."

The thick-torsoed security guard, who remained quietly by the desk and who'd watched Telly carefully during the entire proceedings, turned and led the way along a narrow passage to the interior of the ship. They turned into a wider passage and moved forward towards the 'Assault Team Quarters'. This suite of compartments was located about 15 meters forward of the airlock's entrance passage, and the two covered the distance without comment. After Telly entered the ATQ suite alone, the hatch closed, and he suspected, locked behind him.

Humming absentmindedly to himself, Telly checked each compartment carefully to determine whether they were adequate for his combat team. The suite contained a day room, conference room, gymnasium, shower and lavatory facility, and four cabins. Each cabin had two self-sealing RA-40 pressure bunks, a desk and chair set, and a guest couch. He noted there were no computer hookups.

In the day room, a number of plasti-cartons were stacked neatly in one corner; these contained his assault team's specialized

equipment and clothing. The only things missing were their combat gear and weapons, which were deposited in the ship's armory. These Nashramh Sisters wanted complete control of the arsenal, a requirement Telly understood. It was their ship, and given past crimes committed against them by the G.C.C., they weren't taking any chances of allowing outsiders to gain control of their vessel.

After inspecting the suite and finding it adequate, Telly entered the 'commander's' cabin, which was slightly larger than the others, and sat down at the desk. Leaning back comfortably, he removed a sealed sheaf of documents from his tunic and broke the seal. He pulled out the contents and studied them.

Telly was 92 years old, and this was his first assignment as a commanding officer of a deep-probe operation. His combined forces pathfinder assault team, QRA80-2B, would have eight members, including him self, though the documents didn't say what it would be. His orders indicated it was a joint operation with the Nashramh. Just what this partnership entailed would be disclosed by a special sisterhood representative at a later time.

This was Telly's first action involving the Nashramh. He felt he owed them a lot for having given him a real home, family, and education. No matter what happened in the future, he didn't intend to make any harsh judgments against them. Whatever their mistakes in dealing with the G.C.C. in the past had been, they were the first to admit them and try to correct the situation. Privately, he was glad to be back with them, even if he couldn't admit his affiliation to anyone.

On all of his past missions, Telly had been thoroughly briefed beforehand. Now, he was the commanding officer of a secret mission he felt completely unprepared for. In fact, his entire pathfinder team was unfamiliar to him personally; he only knew about them by reputation.

With nothing else to do yet, Telly leaned back in his chair, relaxed and thought about his past training.

"All right, boys and girls listen to me and listen well. You don't know what work is yet," Captain Long spoke out loudly. "You're nothing more than a bunch of innocent little chicks, fresh out of the egg, and you're going to learn what reality is all about."

Captain Karina Long was a tall, handsome woman with short, straw-blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. Telly had seen her

before while in pathfinder training and knew she was an old hand, just as were Ham Ordin and his other combat instructors. She didn't look very tough, but was reputed to be a slave driver, totally devoid of any kind of mercy when it came to field operations.

After serving his time at Tuckomay-Brit's Jellicolm B-2 Intensive Training Center and special ground operations on the hellhole of Truhn IV, Telly was transferred to Draco III, a primitive desert world in a system of 11 planets orbiting a yellow sun. Now, he was beginning a 44-year stint of field operations, with really tough professionals, that would include both field exercises and actual combat missions. This was what he'd been working for all of these past years. It felt good to be where the action was.

"I want you to unlearn all the crap they fed you at the G.C.C. Officer Candidate Academy about being ladies and gentlemen with noble-sounding rules for conducting a war. You are now going to become professional killers and merciless sons-of-bitches to any and all enemies. You will learn to live by a combination of pure instinct and brutal intellect that allows your enemy no chance to win. You will kill without warning and relentlessly pursue your assigned goals until you've succeeded in every element of your mission profiles."

Telly was interested in her descriptions of the eight out of eleven planets in these systems that were used for their field exercises when they weren't actually out on combat missions. It would be either field work or combat raids all the time, without rest or respite. Being a pathfinder wasn't going to be easy for anyone. There would be no letdown in their training or overall preparedness.

"Draco III, as you will soon discover, is a garden world and recreation area compared to what I have in store for you. Draco IV is primarily covered with oceans and barren little islands in the midst of one continuous 2.4-G storm that makes life nearly impossible on the surface. Draco V has great disease-ridden swamps and jungles, and Draco X is mostly ice. The other planets range from barren rocks to poisonous atmospheres, with fantastic electrical storms and turbulent 90-plus kilometer winds. Best of all, none of these planets has a normal gravitational field. You'll all enjoy the wonderful torments of being too light or too heavy in the worst of physical conditions."

Karina was right, the years before, filled with physical and mental tortures, was nothing compared to these advanced field operations. Her combined combat team of 300 men and women, with both delta type and special minority races, had been split up into constantly changing groups and pressed into endless cycles of mock raids and actual combat missions. A number of path-finders were badly wounded or killed during those years, and Telly realized that only their superior training, individual competence and fanatical penchant for teamwork made them successful. Not one man or woman dropped out of the team. They were the very best, or they wouldn't have made it through the pathfinder's academy and been assigned to Draco III in the first place.

Smiling to himself, Telly wondered if this mission would be any tougher than those he'd experienced under Karina Long's leadership. Well, time would tell.

One other instructor came to mind. She was a strange little woman whom it was said was from the Nashramh, although she never confirmed it. Her name was Kruminah B'Tziah and she was the most knowledgeable human being he'd ever encountered. She could speak in perfect detail for hours on end without either repeating or contradicting herself. Her knowledge of the enemy and his methods bespoke firsthand experience which, again, she never confirmed. Whatever her real background, Kruminah was both a wealth of valuable information and was possessed with an odd sense of humor; if indeed it was humor.

"I'm told that you people are able to function in any kind of situation," she smiled, "and that may well be true. Have any of you young men ever dated one of those Nashramh women?"

One dark-skinned lieutenant nodded and answered that he had.

"Well, well now. Just what kind of job did she have, my good man?" she said, trying to appear snippy.

"She was an officer on one of their scout destroyers," he answered, "I believe she was a commander, although I never saw her in uniform."

"So you think she might have been a commander, do you," she said, pretending to be dismayed. "Did she ever tell you she was?"

"No, she didn't."

"If you think back, I'm sure that you will realize she never told you anything of substance, but rather learned everything about you, right?"

"Why," the young man paused in thought, "I hadn't thought about it, but you're right. I'd just gotten my commission and was probably more talkative . . . no, not really more talkative."

"You see, my young friend, she, like all of her sisters, was trained to take everything, but to give nothing. If you think about it, you will realize this was also true when you were in bed with her. Oh, you don't need to deny that. She wouldn't have wasted her time on you if she hadn't been horny."

The lieutenant, without embarrassment, laughed and agreed.

"You people were trained to infiltrate enemy-dominated populations for a variety of complex mission profiles, and have a great deal of experience with respect to gathering both military and cultural data. Each of you has been screened, counseled and indoctrinated to overcome any personality deficiencies that might in any way curtail your ability to work effectively either alone or within a team. You've learned to work not only together, but with a variety of different kinds of allies, both human and omnicastrated beta groups. The proof of this is aptly displayed each time you take on an assignment. The one vital aspect of your training that's totally lacking, though, is that none of you has as yet worked with the Nashramh Sisterhood's rim fleet, and in this respect you have much to learn."

Telly grinned to himself at her last statement, because she was absolutely right. All through his early training with the Nashramh, he'd heard stories from the sisters themselves about their methods of operation. They had a unique style of their very own which they shared with no one, and he'd been trained along these same lines himself. He didn't know how much Kruminah knew about his affiliation with the sisterhood and didn't volunteer any information. From all appearances, she'd more than likely done her homework.

Kruminah had everyone's rapt attention since she was discussing something considered an enigma to the G.C.C. navy. For all of their vast experience as allies with the Nashramh during the past 100,000 years, they knew surprisingly little about this ancient sisterhood.

"First of all, the Nashramh are sound allies if you understand how to deal with them. Otherwise they're deadly enemies," she

continued. "They're paranoid beyond all description when it comes to internal security and will share nothing with you unless it is absolutely necessary with respect to their operations. They will always keep their word to the letter, but you must be sure that you, in fact, have their word. Never take anything for granted when you deal with these creatures."

The only time Telly questioned anything that Kruminah said, on any subject, was when she took this obviously negative stance regarding the Nashramh. There was a real sense of hostility here, and he began to wonder if she was really a part of the sisterhood as everyone suspected. When it came to discussing their foibles, she never pulled her punches.

She went on to describe in infinite detail the various traps that unsuspecting G.C.C. pathfinder and naval personnel blundered into while dealing with these strange sisters. The variety of her examples and the depth of her knowledge was phenomenal and could only be known by an insider; a Nashramh Sister with a long and varied career.

This woman, Kruminah, was certainly no lowly sisterhood functionary, but rather a person of high station. No one could have that much experience with the sisterhood and be allowed to discuss it with outsiders unless they were in a high enough position to do so. Telly wondered, at the time, if she was one of those complex binary personalities or even a Magum.

There was something different about her that he couldn't quite put his finger on . . . she was an undisputed authority on every subject she discussed, from the inner workings of the enemy-dominated societies to the Nashramh itself. But, there was a different dimension about her that bothered him. One thing he did find comforting about her, though; she was kind and considerate. She spared nothing to help anyone who didn't grasp what she had to say. Her odd humor put everyone at ease and made otherwise difficult and complex issues appear simple.

She was gentle and kind, but had a sense of perspective that went well beyond bitterness . . . almost as if she'd been confined to Sargon's hell and somehow escaped. Her views of the sisterhood were definitely those of an intimate insider, who appeared to be on the outside, if that made any sense at all.

Two hours after his arrival, the other seven members of Telly's assault team boarded the Yanna Jun and passed through the

same security procedure as he had. The group consisted of four women and three men, paired off in male-female teams, except for one woman who was assigned to work with Telly. All were seasoned pathfinders who'd worked together before, although none had ever met Telly.

Like the sisters of the ship's crew, they were tight-lipped and secretive in their affairs. To them, the attitude of the sergeant-at-arms and the other suspicious sisterhood personnel was normal. If the women had been any different, the pathfinders would suspect some sort of treachery, or worse: lack of competence.

As the assault team silently entered the suite, Telly checked each off on his assignment roster, beginning with his own partner.

(F) Dove Konissah	Corporal II, Communication Tech.
(M) Lam Buce	Corporal III, Demolitions Tech.
(F) Vuera Cognel	Sergeant II, Assassination Expert
(M) Dyson Yokan	Sergeant II, Linguistics Specialist
(F) Mattice Izel	Sergeant IV, Lead Scout
(M) Liskel Faalin	Private V, Medical Tech.
(F) Moskall Rakon	Captain, Med-Doctor & Surgeon

Telly's partner, Dove Konissah, was a short Odomak from a world near the leading edge of the seventh-arm of the outer rim, named Eretz. He understood she was a genius in special communications, cyphers and linguistics.

This was a pretty small assault team for the mission, according to his documents, but the G.C.C. and Nashramh planners determined that a larger force would be detected and thus doomed to failure. They'd reasoned that a small, elite group of pathfinders could move unnoticed through enemy territory and stand the best chance of success in this mission profile, whatever the mission was. Until they were notified further, neither Telly nor any of his team had the slightest idea what the mission was. Each had been trained separately. They knew only that sometime after the Yanna Jun entered into the sub-binary they'd be briefed on the exact details, but not before. Nothing was being left to chance.

As the pathfinder team arrived at their quarters, Telly greeted each and set their first conference for 13:00 hours. First, he'd discuss their situation with the ship's commander, a Sister-Captain Neferah B'Tziah. The team members each nodded in agreement and went about checking out their supplies. Dove

Konissah took up residence in Telly's cabin and stacked her gear next to his.

"Which bunk are you taking, Lieutenant?"

"The port side," he responded, looking up at the attractive woman, "unless you have any objections. Then we can wrestle for it."

"Any time, any place," she grinned. "Do you have any bodyguards to help you out?"

"I've got six of them here."

"You'll need'em, although I'm a good-hearted sort and'll let you have your port side bunk. I wouldn't want to hurt anybody so early in the game."

Telly smiled to himself, wondering just how tough she really was, probably hell on wheels, but with a good sense of humor.

Telly sat alone in the conference room, waiting for the Captain. He'd been escorted from the ATQ suite by two surly security guards and left alone to wait. The guards were silent. They appeared ready for a fight, since they never let their guard down. During his trek from the ATQ suite to the conference room, located some 40 meters forward of the main airlock, Telly got a better feel of the scout destroyer's internal features. The main, axial passageways were three meters-wide and 2.5 meters-high. This was small compared to a G.C.C. destroyer, which had passageways 10 to 12 meters-wide and four to six meters-high, for good air flow and easy passage for the crew. Although the Yanna Jun's passages were relatively small, he noticed the ventilation was excellent. Everything was neat, without obstructions. The Nashramh ships appeared well-thought-out and advanced in design.

The hatch at the end of the room slid open silently. Two women entered without comment. One sat at the head of the table, while the other, a beefy security guard, remained standing next to the hatch. No weapons were in sight, but Telly knew both were armed to the teeth.

The dark-eyed Captain sat silently appraising him as he, in turn, scrutinized her. She looked formidable in her stark black naval uniform, which made her appear lean and tough. She was medium-sized, just over a meter and a half tall, with jet black hair, cut to about four centimeters-long. She walked with a slight limp and her right arm had an odd rigidity about it, although not pronounced. Her dark-brown skin was both wrinkled and badly

scarred, and Telly guessed that she was quite aged, probably 700 to 800 years old.

Upon closer examination, Telly noticed the hair on the right side of her head was a slightly different color and texture, and the scars on her face appeared to be from extensive grafting. Her upper lip had been split, leaving a scarred gap disclosing a sharp feline fang behind it. She'd probably been burned badly and injured in combat or a wreck.

Captain Neferah B'Tziah stared coldly at the handsome young pathfinder lieutenant, noting that he was indeed an elf. All she needed on her ship was a damned oversexed elf who'd get into everyone's pants if she didn't keep him locked up. She knew all about these bastards, oh yes she did . . . there was that son-of-a-bitch who little Jenn had married . . . oh yes, she knew. This one looked like he could charm the pants off everyone in her crew, including her Chief of Security. Well, this charmer was in for a surprise if he tried anything out of order.

Telly was a good judge of people and could discover a lot from the way they didn't say something, as well as how they did say it. Body language was no mystery to him either, and he could tell the captain was uptight about him, and it was more than just having a stranger on her ship. He'd felt hostility like this from others who disliked pretty little elves. If that was her problem . . . well, tough shit!

After reviewing the pathfinders' assignment documents she'd brought with her, Neferah turned her attention back to Telly. Appraising him slowly, she spoke softly, without a trace of expression.

"You and your contingent are on this vessel without my agreement and over my objections. But my orders are clear. We are to transport you to a destination as yet undisclosed, await your signal for return, and bring you back along with additional passengers to the G.C.C. transfer station 86022A."

Without any change of expression, she added, "You and your contingent are to remain in your assigned quarters at all times except mess call, at which time you will be escorted to the wardroom and then back to your quarters. Do you have any questions, Lieutenant?"

Telly watched the captain carefully, finding that despite her obvious dislike for him and his team, there was something he

definitely liked behind those softly glowing black eyes. It bordered on being charming.

Well, she was being honest he could say that for her. He could understand her attitude since she'd been pressured into a situation she didn't want any part of. Probably under different conditions, they could learn to tolerate one another or even become friends. He would make no rash judgments about her now.

"I have no objections, Captain."

"Then you are dismissed," she replied and then rose from her chair and left the room.

The Yanna Jun eased alongside the larger vessel, reeling in her grappling lines at a measured rate. Moments earlier, the Nashramh scout destroyer had emerged from the sub-binary at these pre-set coordinates. As soon as she'd broken into temporal space, both CIC and Communications reported a narrow beam signal from their port stern. Now they were coming together with another Nashramh warship.

The pathfinders knew nothing of this meeting other than the Yanna Jun had left the sub-binary. They all felt the sudden changes in their physical makeup as the ship shifted through seven stages into temporal space. Telly was interested in the rapid succession of those emergence stages, which took only 22 minutes each. The G.C.C. vessels he'd been on took more than an hour and a half per stage. The warship's drives were quieter than any he'd heard before, especially when they were altering the state of the ship's atomic structure. There was no characteristic 'vibratory drone' and the accompanying sense of nausea. Each of the pathfinders glanced at one another and nodded knowingly. They expected surprises. Each one was making mental notes of everything.

Once the vessels were secured, a short transit tube was extended from the larger ship and fused to the receiving ring around the Yanna Jun's port side airlock. As soon as the connection was made, the transit tube was pressurized with warm atmospheric gases.

Three uniformed figures entered the extended transit tube in silence, moving quickly to the Yanna Jun's open outer airlock. Once they passed through the lock, armed security guards

escorted them to the conference room where Captain B'Tziah waited with a sense of hostility.

Neferah rose as the three entered her conference room. She recognized Sister-Admiral Drubb from RAD Intelligence Planning, but didn't know the others. One was a tall, slim girl with shiny dark hair and milky white skin. She was no more than a child, perhaps just out of college, but her eyes were those of a Magum. Then there was the other. She didn't like the looks of it, or was it him?

"Welcome aboard the Yanna Jun, Admiral Drubb," she said softly, saluting for the benefit of the two strangers, "Peace-be-with-you."

Cecil Drubb returned the salute indifferently and took her place at the head of the table. Her companions seated themselves to her left. Neferah gracefully seated herself to the Admiral's right, noting her lack of oral response and wondering just what was coming up.

Displaying no emotion, Neferah glanced casually at the offensive-looking creature sitting across from her. The very sight of him made the hairs on the back of her neck stand out like hackles on an enraged bird of prey. He was a strongly built biped, but otherwise reminded her of some sort of primordial beast that was strikingly canine. She realized that her jaw was clenched tightly, showing her obvious distaste for the creature. Its or his light brown hair was cropped short but still looked mangy. So did his coarse grey skin. His mouth and nose protruded out of his face, almost like an obscene mid-transformation between a wolf and a man, and large, sharp canine teeth protruded slightly from his tight lips.

Normally Neferah kept a passive attitude on the surface, but something about this creature unnerved her. She despised him instantly and didn't try to hide it.

The damned creature's soft brown eyes appraised her coolly. He was large and muscular, although his obviously immense strength was contained and calm. She sensed he was capable of great speed and coordination. But something about him made Neferah's hair stand on end. Involuntarily, she extended her claws.

"No need to upset your self, my dear Neferah," the strange creature said, breaking the heavy silence that filled the conference room. His voice was, not surprisingly, deep and guttural. "Believe it or not, our canine and feline species do actually get along famously on many a world."

That statement made her dislike him even more. He was either laughing at her or trying to provoke her. Whatever the case, he wasn't going to get the best of her. She was a top professional. This creature had nothing to laugh about.

She nodded curtly, more disturbed than she wished to admit. His eyes seemed to look right into her, for they too were the eyes of a Magum. It suddenly occurred to her what bothered her so much. It was his smell. He was well-groomed and obviously clean, but that subtle canine odor irritated her senses.

"Damn it," she thought to herself, "Two bloody Magums at the same time . . . one a child and the other a big dog." Nevertheless, this was her ship and there would be military protocol exercised on it.

"It's Captain B'Tziah," she retorted coolly, "and just who the hell are you?"

"Whatever you wish, my dear," he answered with a wide smile that bared his sharp fangs.

Admiral Drubb leaned back in her chair, carefully monitoring this brief, but hostile, exchange. With a visibly concerted effort, Neferah broke away from the canine's magnetic eyes and glanced over at the admiral.

Cecil Drubb was a tall portly woman with a matronly appearance, more like a soft-hearted mother than an admiral. Her warm eyes were serious, but smiling cheerfully, she spoke in a light tone.

"Well now, you two are we going to have a cat and dog fight here, or can I make proper introductions and proceed with the business at hand? We have a mission to discuss, in case you were unaware of the fact, and this is neither the time nor place for personality conflicts. You can pick another time to squabble with one another. Okay?"

Neferah nodded curtly, noting the serious expression in the admiral's eyes. She'd have to watch herself. She was used to operating out here in the void as the sole authority over her ship. There was a hell of a difference between being a hunter and warrior, and having to deal with these fat bureaucrats from higher echelons. She hadn't wanted any part of this crap anyway, and she didn't like being told what to do on her own ship. If she had her own way, she'd kick the whole damned lot of them off the Yanna

Jun, but then that was only a flight into fantasy. Now she had to grin and bear their annoying presence.

Cecil understood the captain's feelings. It was a pity the cat woman was so bitter and tired. She knew all about this Sister-Captain Neferah B'Tziah. She was, after all, one of the Nashramh's best warship captains. Neferah would be dealt with, despite her hang-ups concerning non-sisterhood passengers aboard her ship.

"Good," she smiled dryly. "First, I am Sister-Admiral Cecil Drubb from RAD Special Operations and Intelligence Planning. This young lady beside me is Sister-Magum LiCu, who will serve as your communications link with both RAD Station LA1-406C and Council Central. This gentleman" and she nodded towards the dogman, "is Captain Arden Ardel of the Ansharim Brotherhood."

Cecil paused for a moment, considering her next words carefully. "Brother Arden Ardel is a Magum and a key to the upcoming assignment. Any further difficulties between you and him during the course of this mission will not be tolerated. Do I make myself clear, Captain B'Tziah?"

"Agreed," Neferah replied coldly. "What may I do for you and your company, Admiral?"

"We will discuss that when Lieutenant B'Mesziah and Captain Rakon have joined us. You may send for them now, Captain."

Neferah rose to her feet without comment and walked to the comm-link at the other end of the conference table. She activated the unit and ordered her first officer, Commander Framon Aebin, to deliver the two pathfinders to the conference room immediately. She then sat down and remained silent as the others made light conversation about old times.

Telly and Moskall seated themselves across from the young woman and strange-looking man. Captain B'Tziah was seated to their left at the opposite end of the table from a portly woman with Admiral's straps on her shoulders, who was to their right. Telly noted that Neferah was stiff and overly formal, her normal hostility now oozing out like a chill from the void.

Something out of the ordinary was obviously in the air, and Neferah apparently wasn't looking forward to it. Telly guessed the two people, seated opposite from him, were part of the problem, since Neferah never let her eyes leave them for more than a brief moment.

He focused his attention on the strange-looking man sitting across from him. Telly had never seen a creature like this before. His appearance was enough to frighten little children with his perpetual vulpine sneer, but Telly could see he was nevertheless a likeable sort. He noted that the man and his young companion both had eyes that were soft and deep like Phel's.

Admiral Drubb made her introductions, omitting the fact that the other two were Magums. Telly recognized this, however. Their eyes gave them away to anyone who knew what to look for.

"Now that we know each other's identities," she continued formally, "we'll get down to business. First of all, the location of our strike will be kept secret from the attack team for strategic reasons, some of which will become obvious later on. Second, the target of this raid is a young Belial whose name we do not know as yet. What we do know is that he's visiting one of Kutulusargon's new communications network facilities."

She paused for effect, and she made it. Telly's senses were reeling. How in Sargon's hell could they hope to even get close to a Belial? "My god," he whispered silently to himself, and caught Neferah's eye. She too looked surprised, if not awed, and now all of her hostility was replaced by rapt attention.

Cecil continued. "Captain Ardel will accompany your attack team, Lieutenant B'Mesziah, as a team member and liaison officer. You and your people are charged with the responsibility of locating, capturing alive, and returning the Belial to this vessel for transport back to joint G.C.C. and Nashramh control."

Telly and Moskall looked at one another, both appreciating the magnitude of this assignment.

"You will be given a set of special information crystals, Doctor Rakon, which you will study privately, and the contents of which you will disclose to no one. As to locating the Belial, we have an agent located in the proximity of his ultimate destination who will be in contact with Brother-Captain Ardel and Sister LiCu, who will in turn direct you to your target. The means of communication between them will remain secret with both Brother Ardel and Sister LiCu, who will discuss them with no one. Last, Brother Ardel will brief your assault team on the terrain to be encountered and tactics to be implemented."

Cecil turned her attention to Telly and continued. "You, Lieutenant B'Mesziah, have our complete confidence in this

operation. This ship, and her captain, will give you and your strike-team every form of cooperation and are further charged with total responsibility for your tactical support and coverage."

Admiral Drubb outlined the other mission details for another half hour, then, concluded the short briefing, during which no one else spoke. She then called an adjournment and personally shook hands with each member of the strike team present.

"This will be no piece of cake," she said gravely, as she shook Telly's hand, "but we know you well and trust your leadership abilities, Telakin B'Meszhiah, and you have the best people in our command to support you." Then turning and speaking quietly so the others couldn't hear, she added, "good hunting, my young brother."

After the others left the conference room and were escorted to their quarters, Neferah accompanied Admiral Drubb to the port-side airlock. Once they arrived, the Admiral stopped before leaving and addressed the tough-minded captain.

"Mark my words, Sister-Captain B'Tzhiah, this is one of our most ambitious and important raids we've undertaken in more than 10,000 years. You and Lieutenant B'Meszhiah are the best we have, and we're counting on both of you. As soon as you drop into the sub-binary, you are to activate your deadman mechanism, and you are not to deactivate it again until I personally board this vessel and order you to do so. Do you understand me, Captain?"

"Yes I do," Neferah replied crisply, saluting.

"Good hunting, Neferah," Cecil added, her voice softening, returning the salute. She then turned and left the ship, thinking to herself that she would talk further with this cat-woman when she returned, if there was time.

Sister-Commander Trek Mouldan stood next to the sergeant-at-arms' desk and waited for Neferah to finish her discussion with Admiral Drubb. Her expression was blank and she displayed no interest at all in their conversation. Trek, a tall, well-proportioned woman of 250 years, commanded the Yanna Jun's security force. Both she and her eight subordinates were notoriously close-mouthed and aloof of all shipboard activities except their own duties. Neither she nor her security people had said a single recorded word to anyone on the ship other than official statements in the pursuit of their duties. Otherwise, they were a completely separate organization on the vessel.

Once Admiral Drubb left the ship, Neferah turned to start for the bridge when she noticed Trek standing by the desk holding a thick pouch with an Admiralty seal on it.

Trek never volunteered to sit in on any conferences or to take part in negotiations of any kind, but stayed in the shadows and out of sight all the time. Oddly, she appeared to know exactly what was going on without ever being informed about it. Neferah wasn't surprised to see the thick packet under her arm. She figured there were more details about the upcoming mission than she'd been entrusted with. These security people were an enigma to her, but then she had no complaints about their superb performance. No one and nothing had ever gotten past the security people and onto the Yanna Jun that wasn't authorized.

"Well Mouldan," Neferah purred, "is there something you have to say, or are you just lounging here?"

"Yes, Captain, I have a word of advice for you," Trek stated flatly. "Don't take Admiral Drubb lightly, and cooperate completely with the pathfinder team and treat them as if they're members of the Nashramh."

"I'll take your suggestion under advisement," Neferah retorted, "I command this vessel in my own way, so don't interfere in my affairs."

"These are Council Central's affairs, Captain, and you will take my advice literally or I will remove you from your command. Do I make myself clear?"

Neferah glared at the calm-eyed woman and started to rebut her claim. Then she remembered the security chief was indeed empowered to remove a ship's captain if she was either incapacitated or deliberately disobeying orders.

"I'll take your advice literally," Neferah responded, and brushed by the Commander as she made for the bridge. That was the longest statement Mouldan had ever made to her, so it must be extremely important. This was going to be an interesting, if not disastrous, mission and there wouldn't be any room for playing games. With this in mind, Neferah decided to put aside her reservations and go full speed ahead with the job.

The two pathfinders, accompanied by Captain Ardel, returned to their quarters, while Sister-Magum LiCu stayed alone in the conference room without explanation. The two security guards who escorted them to the ATQ suite were silent and somewhat at ease.

"Welcome to our happy little home," Telly grinned as he entered the ATQ, followed by Ardel and Rakon. The larger man had to duck to enter the suite, his short bristled hair brushing the metal flange.

"In our Brotherhood, every home is happy, and every woman, therein, a charming companion," Ardel laughed back with a canine grin.

Neferah assigned Ardel to the pathfinder quarters for two reasons. First, he would be working and training with them for the duration of the voyage, and second, she didn't want the filthy beast wandering around her ship. As far as Telly was concerned, Ardel was an integral component of the mission and he planned to get the show on the road as soon as they debriefed. Whatever this wolfish-looking character was, Telly definitely had good feelings about him.

Ardel wasted no further time, and as soon as he, Telly and Rakon compared notes, he initiated his first briefing of the pathfinder team.

"Let me clarify our situation now, so we can get off to a good start," he began in his guttural voice which had a thick, lilting accent. "First, Private Liskel Faalin will take part in phase one of our mission. The rest of you will continue on into phase two."

Telly nodded. It seemed the man held all of the cards, so he agreed without hesitation. "Exactly what will this operation include, insofar as you're prepared to reveal to us?"

Without blinking, Ardel outlined the mission in detail, leaving nothing out. Phase one, he explained, would include their landing on the surface of Aleph, as he designated the planet. "It will entail capturing four high priests of Sargon's Love, along with four of their personal praetorian guards. At this time, Private Faalin, our med-tech, will return to the Yanna Jun with the prisoners, all alive and sedated if possible. If they aren't taken alive, then he'll return with their gamma-complexes.

"Phase two will consist of traveling from this point of capture, an outlying spaceport designated as Bet, to the Belial's place of arrival, designated as Gimel. Once position Gimel is successfully infiltrated, our team will make contact with their special agent, then, proceed to capture the Belial.

"Phase three will include escape plans, designated as Dalet-one and Dalet-two."

Telly realized that both plans were weak at best. The enemy would be aware of their presence and acting to inhibit them. It was up to Telly, who commanded each phase, to determine who would do what. Council Central had already earmarked Private Faalin for phase-one because of his special medical skills and experience as a lighter pilot. If phases two and three failed, then the alternative targets, primarily the high priests, could be used for interrogation and evaluation.

After several hours of presenting their general mission outline, Ardel called for a break. Then grinning wolfishly, he added, "We'll go into the details of each of our operations as soon as my luggage arrives. In it, I have your beautiful priestly robes and praetorian uniforms, as well as a great deal of intelligence information each of you must memorize and master before we attempt this raid."

As Telly and the others listened to the details of the raid, they were amazed by the plan's sheer audacity. To anyone's knowledge of pathfinder history, nothing like this had ever been attempted before. There were the raids on enemy fortifications at Samael-Agtren and Samael-Agboler more than 10,000 years ago, but they were designed to destroy the structures, not take prisoners. This plan was virtually impossible. Getting into the fortified target area and capturing a young Belial alive was ambitious in itself, but getting out with him was the real problem. The pathfinders hadn't the slightest idea of what a Belial was, other than he wasn't from this galaxy. He was supposedly physically and intellectually superior to them.

Telly shook his head and turned to Rakon. "Well, Moskall, I suspect the sisterhood knows what they're doing, but for the life of me, I can't see much merit to their escape plans. We'd better plan for the worst of all circumstances and then work out our plans from there."

"I agree," she nodded, "once we get in there, we can't let time work against us. Surprise and speed are our only real assets in this kind of operation."

Captain B'Tziah sat at her desk her feet propped up on the edge of her guest couch, and watched her videoscreen with interest while occasionally sipping at a mug of calem.

She'd issued orders to allow the pathfinders nominal use of the ship's facilities, especially the main gymnasium, for their training

sessions which took place 20 hours a day. Una Mayer, her sergeant-at-arms, readily agreed.

"You know, boss," she had grinned, "there isn't any use wasting our time trying to keep those birds locked up. The ways they have of fighting just overrules all our precautions, even if we do have their weapons. They could kill us off quite easily if they had cause to do so. After all, that's what pathfinders are trained to do."

"Agreed," Neferah murmured softly, her voice almost a caressing hiss. She didn't waste time with excess words on any matter, and one word from her on the ship got all the results she needed. She knew Una was right, and, in any event, she had her orders from Admiral Drubb.

Neferah spent hours watching the pathfinders' workout sessions in the Yanna Jun's main gymnasium, appraising their fighting techniques. Una knew what she was talking about. They were a tough bunch of birds. Their young commanding officer interested her now that Admiral Drubb had indicated he was special to the sisterhood. Yes, Cecil had clearly stated that both Neferah and this Telakin B'Mesziah were the best that the Nashramh had, and that was no slip of the tongue. Trek Mouldan implied as much during their short conversation in the airlock after the admiral left the ship. It seemed impossible, but Neferah was struck with the idea that this young man might in some way be related to her long lost friend, Jenn. "God," she thought to herself, "wouldn't that just be something?"

Neferah was a solitary person. Tough and uncompromising, she preferred her own company to that of people, other than her own officers and crew. Outsiders didn't really interest her other than as professional or casual acquaintances. There'd been a time, though, when she'd had very close friends; all had long since died. If any of them were reborn into other bodies, she had no indication of it. The very idea that this young elf pathfinder was a direct link to her long dead friend, Jenn, was just too much to hope for. In fact, she'd never met Jenn's son whose name was, if she remembered correctly, Telakin. Unfortunately, it was nothing more than wishful thinking.

Now she watched the pathfinders repeat each move over and over again until it became second nature to each of them. They practiced each move they'd have to make, such as walking like a praetorian, saluting, and a wide variety of subtle movements that

never satisfied their tough Lieutenant. The practice sessions went on and on without respite, and as Neferah watched, she realized she was beginning to like this Telakin's style. Even that doggy character, Ardel, was beginning to grow on her, as she thought to herself, "like a bunch of fleas."

"Okay, let's try our entry again. Remember we all love our Sweet Sargon and it has to show in our eyes," Telly waved everyone to his or her position, which they already knew so well that they even dreamed about it at night. "Now on my mark. . . ."

Neferah smiled to herself and watched the drill carefully, trying to see just what wasn't being done right. It looked pretty good to her the last 20 times, but the Lieutenant wasn't satisfied . . . maybe it was the look in their eyes.

Sister Una Mayer and several of her tough gunnery sisters were recruited to act as enemy priests and praetorians for the pathfinders' phase-one exercise. Telly trained them in basic enemy fighting techniques with no holds barred, while Arden Ardel coached them in the finer points of each move. None of the ship's security people would have anything to do with the practice sessions and kept to themselves.

Telly impressed Neferah as the fastest-moving creature she'd ever seen in action. He was the most graceful Shambu expert she'd ever watched outside of matches between masters. She watched the sessions, coldly amused, as he and his people made spaghetti out of Una and her sisters. But then, the women were learning new fighting techniques that would benefit them in the future.

Una was sitting on Neferah's guest couch for nearly an hour, watching the action on the screen, and commenting on each of the different pathfinder's techniques.

"You see that little Odomak there, Dove Konissah, the one to the right of the Lieutenant."

"So?"

"So only an idiot would try to outmaneuver her. That damned asshole doesn't pull her punches and will knock the tar out of you without batting an eyelid. She doesn't have an iota of mercy in her. I thought she'd broken my back and she was only warming up to her move! I won't get near her again."

At that moment Ardel came into action on the screen. "Now that dog Ardi, well, he's pretty fast too, but there's no way to get the best of him."

"Come on now, you're a seasoned killer and ten times as fast as that cur, Una. Don't be so lavish with your praise."

"Yeah boss, so it would seem. But every time I get a good shot at him, he just catches me in mid-motion and then guides me down onto the mat. It's almost like he's playing with me. He's so smooth and gentle that I could swear that if we were alone he would be making love to me and calling it a practice drill. God is he strong . . . like spring steel, but soft!"

"What was he doing to your hand this morning, Una?"

"Kissing it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, he smacked me up against the bulkhead and thought he'd hurt me. So he apologized and kissed my hand."

"Were you hurt?"

"Yeah, but I didn't let him know it."

"Why didn't you paste him one for doing that?"

"Are you kidding?" Una smiled broadly. "I liked it! He might be ugly, but he's really a gentleman, and those are few and far between in this galaxy."

"Hey, Barfbrains, you sound horny," Neferah smirked, "real horny. I think you've been out here too long."

"You bet, Cap'n," Una retorted, "Real horny."

Only Sister-Magum LiCu knew where the Yanna Jun was headed during the nine months she remained in the sub-binary. She'd personally set the navi-computer to top secret coordinates shortly after she'd boarded the vessel, and then retreated to her cabin where she kept to herself. LiCu's near monastic existence inside her cabin was understood to involve continuous contact with Council Central. She wasn't available for socializing. No one took offense.

The navi-computer signaled their arrival at the pre-set coordinates, and they were finally emerging from the seventh step out of the sub-binary.

"Systems," Neferah spoke into her comm-link, "activate cloaking system preset."

"Activated," came the instant reply.

"Weapons sections, what's your status?"

"Section one on line."

"Section two on . . . "the weapons groups reported in order until all were accounted for."

"I am now in control of the helm," she announced, "red alert . . . on my mark. Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . mark!"

Neferah sat poised in her large command chair and studied the curved gridscreen intently as they broke into temporal space. Instantly the cloaking system came into effect, rendering the warship invisible to both the unaided eye and the enemy's highly advanced detection equipment. Bright starfields lit up the gridscreen and Neferah studied the constellations carefully, trying to get a fix on their location. Damn it! She couldn't recognize a single star group in the area.

"What do you make of it, Jabbin?" she asked her navigator, a bit perturbed by the situation.

"I can't find anything on my random pattern catalogue, but I can tell you we're in the seventh-arm, near the lower edge.

"How do you know?"

"By the location of TB2897C and ADT1644 in the lower quadrant, see there, in grid 122-mem."

"I see them."

LiCu entered the upper bridge and moved next to the captain's chair. She seemed like a child and entirely out of place in an environmental protection uniform, much less on the bridge of a warship. She smiled and spoke softly, which erased all vestiges of childhood innocence.

"Don't waste your time trying to figure where we are, Captain. Our starcharts don't have this information on them, although they will doubtlessly be on record when we return." Her dark eyes twinkled as she glanced at the fascinated navigation officer on the platform just below her. "Besides, we prefer to keep our knowledge confined to as few people as possible, just in case things go wrong."

Neferah returned her attention to the gridscreen. The Yanna Jun was resting motionless in the void between four distinct star groups. "Well, my Grace, we're in a nice new neighborhood. To which of these lovely little jewels would you like us to make our heading?"

The cloaked warship entered into a high orbit over a shining blue-green world registering 1.9 degrees above normal on the Argonel gravity scale. There was row upon row of brightly lit military vessels ringing the planet, and further out lay 22 huge black enemy battle-cruisers that completely dwarfed all the others. They were in a star group of six solar systems, and their target

world was the second of a family of ten planets that orbited a standard three plus yellow sun.

"Looks like we made it in time for the party," Neferah noted as she brought her helm around and made for a low orbit. "Just what the doctor ordered, my Grace."

"Good. Release the lifeboat-fighter as soon as you reach the proper coordinates and move away immediately," LiCu spoke clearly as she studied the gridscreen's image of the beautiful white clouded world below them.

Telly patted Mattice Izel on the shoulder and grinned. "Well, now we can get a little exercise and play around in the bushes for a while. Not a bad looking place, is it?"

"It almost looks too good to be true," she responded, "looks like a real vacation spot for the rich and famous."

"Come now children," Dyson Yokan spoke seriously, "we must all be on our best behavior from now on. Remember, God is coming to our party."

Everyone was strapped in on the fighter-lifeboat, piloted by two Nashramh security people who had nothing to say. They'd boarded two hours before the Yanna Jun entered her high orbit over the target world, and watched the proceedings on their own shipboard gridscreen. Now they were waiting for the vessel to eject from her moorings and catapult them down to the planet's darkened surface. There was the usual tenseness that preceded any dangerous mission, but otherwise everyone felt positive about the job ahead of them.

"According to LiCu, those 20 enemy battle-cruisers are the vanguard of a larger force due to arrive at any time. We have an easy go of it getting down there, but coming back up is quite another question," Arden added as a serious note. "Let's hope they don't have time to register us on their screens before we land. We may be in for a lot of running and dodging when we get to the surface, so smile a lot and enjoy life while you can."

"Whoopy-doo, isn't our little doggy just a bit glum?" Vuera smirked. "Mommy Cognel always warned me against playing with such cranky little pets."

"Arf, arf," Lam Buce chimed in, "I get the first tree."

"It seems I have some doubtful admirers," Arden laughed and barked back.

"Disengage!" Neferah's voice snapped over the open comm-link as the small vessel suddenly jerked and spun away from the Yanna Jun. Everything happened within a few short seconds and the lifeboat-fighter was plummeting downward straight for the dark surface only 100 kilometers below.

Neferah moved the Yanna Jun out of her stationary orbit just above the planet's equator and made for a point 20 degrees to the north at an altitude of 160 kilometers. Now it was time to sit and wait for the action on the ground to take place.

"Captain," LiCu interrupted Neferah's attention toward the glowing planet that took up most of the gridscreen, "we have much to do now in preparation for both the best of all possibilities and for the worst."

"I've already initiated our emergency countermeasure plans and considered a number of escape procedures," Neferah responded as she turned toward the Magum.

"Not for all contingencies, Captain."

"Oh?"

"Yes. We will, if necessary, remove this vessel to Sargon's capital city and detonate our sub-binary drives, if all else fails, and our pathfinder team on the ground is lost. We are not going to allow this young Belial to escape us. We will either capture him alive or destroy him."

"Now I can relate to that!" Neferah grinned. "My Grace, you are a Magum after my own heart!"

Chapter 8

Raid

The element of surprise, thorough planning, and careful selection of trained personnel are essential to a well-executed raid into enemy territory . . . especially if it is to be successful. Above all, a thorough understanding of the enemy's strengths and weaknesses is essential . . . and a bit of luck. . . .

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After a short, plummeting descent, the 80-meter Class I fighter-lifeboat came to a smooth rest at the foot of a long, low hill studded with thick patches of high trees and green meadows. The pilot followed a discreet signal transmitted along a narrow beam of light, and landed precisely on target. The pathfinders secured the vessel quickly, then, proceeded with phase-one.

Telly and Mattice Izel emerged from the craft first. Moving low to the ground, they made for the blue light generator only 30 meters distant, which was set up by unknown allies who'd preceded them here. Sergeants Cognel and Yokan, next out of the hatch, took positions on the opposite side of the vessel.

Telly glanced to his left, where Mattice covered his flank. As he approached the signal generator, a second blue light lit up. Then both blinked out.

A lone figure, silhouetted against the stars, appeared next to the darkened transmitter. "May Sweet Sargon be blessed," he murmured softly to Telly and Mattice, "with a venereal disease."

Telly responded with a smile, "Far too good for him."

The man spoke again with suppressed excitement, smothering an urge to raise his voice. "Is the dog unleashed?" he asked in a whisper, moving forward and grasping Telly's outstretched hand. "He'll know me."

"Verily, he is unleashed," Telly whispered with a grin as another voice sounded from his right.

"I know you, Dolph. Now let's get this bloody show on the road." Ardel silently approached the two and shook Dolph's hand while grasping him by the shoulder. "It's good to see you again, my brother."

Dolph nodded, his voice betraying emotion. "Yes my friend, my exile's been too long, and it does me well to see you again."

The pathfinder assault team formed within minutes and moved out along a narrow path, leading to the edge of a nearby wooded area, to join members of Dolph's resistance group. Before leaving, they covered the lifeboat-fighter with a synthetic net that blended with the terrain, and coordinated their signals with the security women. If all went as planned, Liskel Faalen would return in a few hours with eight sedated prisoners for transfer to the scout destroyer in low orbit 20 degrees to the north.

At the edge of the tree-line, they were joined by six of Dolph's men, who silently nodded their greetings, and shook hands with the pathfinders.

"We have four more people guarding our vehicles," Dolph said in a low voice, "and we still have enough time that we need not rush."

The group made for another long stretch of trees bordering an arterial leading directly to Clovolar Spaceport, 45 kilometers away. The brisk march to the secluded, tree-laden grove seemed to heighten Telly's anticipation. Nestled between the high-topped and umbrella-branched trees were their transport vehicles. Four guards waited next to the two low-profile delivery trucks with Sargon's cross emblazoned in red, white and black on each side.

The vehicles were designed for special-delivery assignments, primarily transporting fresh-cut flowers to Sargon's sacred sanctuaries at the spaceport and at the central park of his capital city. "These flowers will be used by visiting foreign dignitaries when they greet Sweet Sargon," Dolph explained.

The group split in half, 10 members to each truck, and started the second leg of phase one. Now they had to capture the priests and praetorians alive.

Ardel and Telly sat across from Dolph, who had the look of a wild animal in his eyes.

"How many men do you have in your group?" Telly asked the hard-looking man.

"There are 13 of us left, Lieutenant. The two others are waiting for us at our destination."

"I was informed that you had 1,200 people last year," Arden interjected. "What happened?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, Arden, we were infiltrated by a mole some years ago and when the news came of Sweet Sargon's impending visit, they moved in on us."

"They got everyone except 13?" Telly queried. "How did you evade them this long?"

"We kept the mole with us, pretending we didn't know who he was while letting him think we were joining an-other group of 500 men. He was actually our security shield as long as his masters thought there were bigger fish to catch. We killed him two hours before you arrived, so we have a day or so to accomplish our mission before they discover he's missing."

"These black beasts sound pretty efficient," Dove murmured, nodding her head.

"They stop at nothing and their infiltration and manipulation techniques are second to none," Dolph explained. "This entire world was populated by intelligent and cultured people who were civilized and living in relative peace for more than 4,000 years. Then, about 1,500 years ago, new strains of a deadly disease that were sexually transmitted by women appeared. At first the people dealt with the problem as a medical one. Then well-coordinated voices increasingly blamed a minority race and promiscuous women for causing the disease to be spread among the majority. So the motive, they preached, was this minority, the 'Talan Orabal', could conquer the world. From that point on, everything came apart. No one would tolerate anything unique or different. Millions died each year, wiping out vast numbers of each succeeding generation, while the governments took oppressive measures to regiment and purify the survivors."

"This is a tactic the Legions of Light have used many times with great success," Dolph continued bitterly. "They usually pick a target group on the perimeter of society, such as prostitutes, homosexuals, or minority races and make them into scapegoats. They, in turn, use members of these same target groups to lead many of their social disruption programs by creating undesirable stereotypes as provocateurs to stir up popular resentment. They use these same victim groups to introduce many different diseases into the majority population and, after a time, bring in a deadly strain that spreads rapidly and infects large numbers of people. Now, once the disease becomes an epidemic, the frightened populations resort to desperate measures to rid themselves of both the infection and the minority that introduced it in the first place. Fear and superstition replace any sense of sanity and the entire population becomes a toy for the Legions of Light to manipulate and turn against one another until war, disease, and famine can reduce them to more manageable numbers."

Waving his hands, Dolph gestured as he spoke. "The new and exalted rulers, who came as Sweet Sargon's priesthood and their allies in government, emerged about 350 years ago and appeared to bring order out of chaos. They orchestrated everything to the last grisly detail, with internment camps being permanently established to confine, and exterminate, anyone who didn't fit in. Now there's less than 10 percent of the original world population left alive. The central government and their clergy strictly control it."

Fifty minutes later, the vehicles unobtrusively pulled into the already secured floral off-loading dock. The team disembarked beside a large walk-in chiller where freshly delivered flowers were stored. Telly could smell their dense perfume. "The damned things smell like Chamber-Lilies," he thought, "God, I never could stand that damned smell, but then it could be methane."

Two of Dolph's men cautiously emerged to meet them. The group of 22 entered the chiller vault, where the sweet odor of poisonous Chamber-Lilies engulfed them like a thick shroud. Row upon row of magnificent flowers wrapped and bound with bright cloth ribbons were stacked on long, low shelves three meters-high. There were more varieties of delicate flowers than Telly had ever seen before, and their mingled scents, the Chamber-Lilies

foremost, were overpowering. He wondered if the narcopoison of the Chamber-Lilies had been nullified.

Midway through the long corridor, the group passed through a small hatch which led to a narrow maintenance tunnel. This, in turn, led to a complex of similar tunnels, through which refrigerant is piped along with water and other materials. The flowers' cloying odors diminished in here, and the air became cool and dry.

After 15 minutes of silently navigating the tunnels, the team arrived at a hole in one of the concrete walls.

"This leads to your rendezvous point," Dolph whispered. "Its 60 meters distant, and we've installed a nearly invisible hatch in the wall of a private transfer passage. It's the only location our prey will be out of scanning range, so we either get them there, or not at all."

Telly nodded; he and his team had practiced a variety of scenarios for capturing the priests and praetorians alive, and this setup was similar to one of them. There was a bonus here, since his plans allowed for scanning devices.

Dolph checked his watch. "The first of our targets should be arriving in about 20 minutes, if they aren't ahead of schedule. These days, the schedules haven't been too accurate."

"Where can we prepare?" Telly whispered back.

Dolph led them to an enlarged area which barely held 10 of them. Dolph's men remained on guard at the other end of the tunnel. The pathfinders carefully removed the special hatch, through which Vuera Cognel and Mattice Izel entered a brightly lit corridor. To their right was a wide metal door where their prey would enter. To their left, about five meters distant, stood another set of doors. Each of the left-hand doors led to a different loading dock. The women waited.

The other pathfinders donned their costumes for their next move. Arden wore his priestly garb as if he'd been born in it, but his ugly head was impossible to disguise. Telly hoped the priest's mask, worn by the exalted priesthood alone, would fit over Arden's long nose.

A grey light next to the metal door blinked twice, before it slid silently open. Telly watched as Vuera caught the emerging priest squarely on the chest. He dropped like a rock. The praetorian spun as Mattice caught him in the rib cage, and he fended off her second blow. As he ducked to retaliate, Vuera struck him across the side

of his neck. His head snapped violently to the side, sending him reeling to the hard floor.

Mattice pressed the switch closing the metal door. The entire skirmish took only seconds. The two women quickly pulled the unconscious men to the rest of the team, then, returned to the corridor to await the next priest and his praetorian.

Liskel Faalin and Moskall Rakon stripped the priest and his guard of their six identification devices, beginning with the frontal-lobe sensor located behind the left eye, and ending with the signet ring on the right-hand index finger. As they removed each device they inserted it into the priest's and praetorian's counterparts, Ardel and Telly. Liskel made dexilon-plate imprints of each prisoner's retinal image, then made duplicates of them.

In less than one minute, he had perfect eyeshields for both Ardel and Telly, who inserted them over their eyes, much like contact lenses. Arden then donned the priest's mask, making minor adjustments so it would fit over his long nose without tipping upward. Then he pulled his cowl over his head, becoming indistinguishable from the original priest.

The entire process of capturing the enemy priest and his guard, and exchanging identity items, took less than four minutes. Vuera and Mattice entered the small room just before Telly and Arden ducked out into the bright corridor. Now, with their predecessors' rhythm and gait, the two made for their exit door, five meters down the hall.

Once they were gone, Vuera and Mattice took up their former positions and awaited their next victims. Liskel gave the two prisoners strong sedative injections and the others bound them with strong plastic straps. The praetorian's neck, they discovered, was broken and Liskel didn't expect him to live.

Telly and Arden marched confidently along the corridor which they'd been told led to the primary loading dock reserved for the priesthood alone. As they passed through the swinging double doors at the end, platform functionaries averted their eyes and bowed respectfully. The two praetorians, who stood next to a parked vehicle, snapped to attention, looking only at Telly, averting their eyes from the priest's cowed and masked face. It was above their station to presume otherwise. Telly had bleached and dyed his hair to a flaxen tint and his eye-shields made his eyes appear bright blue. This, plus a clever ear molding, made him look like all

of the other praetorians, who weren't any taller than he was. The disguise was perfect in every detail, from his linen white uniform with silver piping on his dress hat's short bill and emblem, to his exquisitely polished ivory white leather boots, belt and holster.

The Ansharim and sisterhood planners had done their homework well. Their uniforms looked exactly like the originals. Telly couldn't detect any deviation. This eye for detail assured him that his team had a good chance of making it to point Gimel if they didn't expose themselves unduly.

One of the two praetorians spoke as both saluted. "Welcome, Commander-Colonel," he stated smartly in the Borg-prime tongue. "Your private vehicle is ready for your pleasure."

Telly returned the salute, almost casually, without comment as Arden entered the waiting vehicle. He followed him inside. They'd expected to be addressed in the Borg-prime tongue, but again it was above the guard's station to expect any response from his superior in the presence of a high priest.

The single driver, who sat in a sealed cab at the front of the vehicle, closed the door by automatic controls. Without further ado, they sped away from the luminous loading dock.

Telly maintained his casual and professional demeanor, although his thoughts whirled. He was impressed by the elaborate security system, with its armies of praetorian guards and complex detection devices he knew were on the loading dock and at their destination. The fatal flaw of allowing a masked priest to pass unchallenged, because of the death penalty for looking upon his holy countenance, was absolutely fantastic! It didn't take much imagination to waylay a priest and his escort praetor, remove their identification devices, and impersonate them. Because it was forbidden for anyone, except for Sargon himself, to even acknowledge the presence of a high priest, much less look at him, his team could infiltrate the Belial's own residence unchallenged.

It really amazed Telly that this elaborate security system would contain such an obvious gap. It reminded him of the giant flaw in the enemy invasion fleet during the great conflagration, when Josargon's battleship was destroyed by a G.C.C. attack. With the death of their divine leader . . . no, their god, the entire enemy fleet, who were then in control of the battle, ceased fire, turned around and went back to the galaxy they'd come from. The flaws in enemy thinking were there, and if only they could be identified and

exploited further, maybe this mission could succeed. The enemy had designated no second-in-command to replace their god, which seemed too good to be true. However, only clear thinking, quick action, and a damned hard fight, not wishful thinking, would bring them any kind of success.

Things were looking good so far. Only, that is, if the detection devices corroborated the authenticity of the tiny identification devices implanted in and on their bodies. Telly could still feel the sore spots, one above his left eye, and others in his flesh, left by the implants. Only the signet ring offered no pain.

The vehicle left the spaceport by a deserted freeway reserved for their exclusive use. They headed for a low range of hills to the west, and the vehicle quickly climbed a long grade and sped along through grey tree-lined plantation lands. The freeway entered an even darker forest that nearly blotted out the sky.

Telly sighed inwardly. All was peaceful and too damned easy. He refused to relax, however. He knew if he relaxed and became confident, that would be about the time something would certainly go wrong. Plan for the worst and they might all come out of this in one piece.

"My god!" was his first thought as the ground car finally left the forest and began down the gently sloping hill into the valley below. His gasp was inaudible and he held himself in his expected casual, although professionally alert, manner. But his mind whirled and clicked with amazement.

It was the most beautiful scene he'd ever pictured. As far as he could see, the sloping valley below them was alive with pristine lights. They lighted the night sky like regimented stars fixed with geometric precision, without a single flaw.

Telly glanced over at Arden. Briefly catching sight of his eyes under the cowled mask, he saw that the dog-man was equally enthralled. Despite Telly's disgust for the Legions of Light and all they stood for, he was amazed by their sense of line and beauty.

Some 30 kilometers ahead and to their right, Telly made out the large dark island of the city's central park and the towering 100 story building he knew was the Belial's personal sanctuary. The huge, softly lit building dwarfed everything else and reminded him of a religious monument surrounded by gleaming lights. Studying the structure carefully, he realized it was some sort of opaque material that seemed, in a way, to be black. No doubt this was a

highly technological fortress around which the entire city was built. It was beautiful and aesthetically perfect, yes, but a black fortress in disguise all the same.

"I've never seen anything like this," Telly finally managed to whisper in the Borg-prime tongue.

"That's an understatement," Ardel whispered. "Think of all the energy it takes to light this and the other eight cities on this world. And remember, you're only viewing the surface. Now, the structures average 16 to 25 sub-basement levels. This depends on the floor area. The central fortress has 44 sub-basement levels, each of which is 36.5 square kilometers. The power necessary to operate that building alone could supply the needs of many a small world I've been on."

The two continued their random conversation as the car sped quietly into the heart of the beautiful city. Telly was astounded by the wealth of Arden's information on both the fortress and the gleaming city. Everything around them was as calm and clean as a sleeping hospital ward; it was clear that a well-ordered society existed here.

Telly studied the buildings they sped past. The sheer number of glass and steel towers was especially interesting since their size and architecture were, although uniform in nature, subtly different in both line and structure. This subtlety in difference which, in turn, maintained the uniformity of the city plan, struck him as both sophisticated and graceful, with only the illusion of true differences. There was no hint of the hidden evil or the presence of a totalitarian state here.

The freeway arched off to the right as the vehicle sped steadily toward the monolithic building. As they neared the eastern buttress, the driver slowed to enter a tube leading directly into the buttress. They continued on for another hundred meters before reaching their off-loading ramp which appeared deserted.

Becoming quiet and alert, both Telly and Arden prepared themselves for their next ordeal. Without comment, the driver remotely opened the exit hatch and waited for the two to step out. Then the ground car drove silently away into another tunnel.

Four praetorians in black uniforms appeared as if out of nowhere, saluted Telly, and bowed stiffly, crossing themselves as they averted their eyes from Arden's darkly cloaked form.

"This way, Commander-Colonel," the tall praetorian captain said softly as he gestured to a barely visible door five meters ahead of them. "Your private escort is awaiting your arrival in the vestibule of the holy sanctuary."

Again, Telly returned the salute without comment, handing the man his unholstered pistol, then accompanied Arden through the door which opened automatically at their approach and then closed silently behind them. It was too easy, Telly mused in disbelief. It was impossible that he and his assault team could just waltz into Sargon's private sanctuary as if it was a children's nursery. Obviously there were hidden sensors mounted throughout the entrance tunnel their ground car had entered, and in the long hallway through which they were now passing. These sensors kept absolute track of who they were, and where they were going. The details of all their briefings outlined this fact in infinite detail. But, would their good fortune hold out?

The corridor was every bit as impressive as the outside of the building. It was six meters-wide and 20 meters-high with the walls leaning inward by about one degree. They were constructed of some sleek, shiny, opaque crystalline material which was pleasing to the eye in its symmetry and smoothness. Telly wondered what the rest of the building held as they passed through another door at the end of the hall.

Telly's eyes flickered as he recognized that he and Arden now stood in the sanctuary's vestibule, which measured at least 20 meters on a side and about 30 meters-high. Standing in the middle of the gleaming white floor, a solitary figure waited for them.

As Telly approached the lone figure his eyes widened imperceptibly; she was the most exquisite girl he'd ever seen. Her spun gold hair fell full-length to her waist, and her petite figure, with all the ripe youth of a teenager, was clad in a thin white robe which hung from small gold clasps at her shoulders to her tiny feet. Her face was childlike, with shining dark blue eyes that expressed a love of life and sense of adventure.

The sight of her aroused him, and he had to check his train of thought. Somehow, the girl's graceful movement made it worse, for her robe flowed with her body, exposing a subtle softness that aroused all of Telly's sexual desires as nothing ever had before. A fragrant scent preceded her, and he quickly realized that both her body structure and chemistry were molded to be as pleasing to a

man as was possible. Everything about her drew his eyes and captured his entire attention.

Telly fought to keep his composure and appear as professional as the image of a praetorian officer dictated. Still, his heartbeat thundered in his temples and he wondered if Arden felt the same.

Arden felt the irresistible pull of the girl's breathtaking beauty, and his eyes never left her for a second. He was, however, experienced in dealing with seductive beauty and virtually immune from its temptations. Still, he admired her lovely countenance.

The young girl, perhaps not more than 13 or 14 years of age, bowed at their approach. Her soft eyes, of course, averted from Ardel's cloaked figure.

"I welcome you, my exalted grace, to my lord Sargon's holy temple," she toned in a soft, sweet voice, both musical and lilting. Telly nearly lost his composure and was tempted to smile and say something silly. "Please allow me to escort you to my sweet lord's personal apartment," she added.

She then motioned to a doorway across the huge vestibule, and the three walked to it. As they moved, Telly regained his senses and some measure of control, which was still difficult because her scent wafted back to him, every bit as overpowering as the Chamber-Lilies had been. Yes, she was just as beautiful as the flowers had been and probably just as dangerous. He breathed deeply and tried to appraise his surroundings.

The vestibule had sleek black walls and ceiling with a white floor, which gave Telly a strange sense of hostility. He could feel some sort of warped and alien life force seeping up through his boots, and was relieved when they reached the other doors and entered into a wide hall. Presently they arrived at an open door on the right-hand wall.

"Please enter the elevator and disclose your eyes to my dear lord Sargon's sacred cross," the girl spoke softly, something in the melody of her voice stirring Telly again. She stood aside, bowing, and allowed the two men to precede her into the large elevator.

This was the real test, Telly realized coldly. If their eye sheathing didn't work now, all would be over. Telly halted in the middle of the elevator, and spreading his hands out before him in supplication, bowed his head and then raised it again slowly. Looking straight into the deep black cross of Sargon's birth and

mortal rule, he sensed something hideously alive behind or within it.

Ardel performed the same procedure, allowing only his eyes to show through his face mask, as required of the holy priesthood. Telly's heart pounded again with an excitement bordering on fear.

Silently, the doors slid shut behind them, and the elevator began its rapid journey to the building's 90th surface level - Sargon's private residence. Telly became strangely awed by the deep black cross, which like Sargon's vestibule, emitted that cold feeling of alien awareness. He spoke out softly, almost as if to himself, the prayer of Sargon's love he'd rehearsed so diligently after his first briefing with Arden. His voice full of emotion, he murmured softly:

"Praise is to my god, my eternal Samael, and to his chosen son, my redeemer Sweet Sargon, praise, praise, praise, holy praise to my god."

The elevator glided gently to a stop and the door slid open, revealing a beautiful room decorated and furnished in red, white, and black. The decor impressed Telly as being from an entirely different reality, a reality that was not human as he understood it. He and Arden had passed their test in the elevator and now they stood in a different world. The alien view was fantastically beautiful and appealing, extremely tasteful and artistic in a refined and elegant sense. But there was something unsettling about the unique combination of color schemes and symmetry that he couldn't put his finger on. Everything in the large room seemed alien to his very senses.

The room and all that it contained was beautiful, although everything seemed slightly out of proportion to what Telly thought it should have been. He wasn't sure if this was the way his senses interpreted what his eyes saw, or if the black ones, because of their alien origins, perceived things differently. He suspected that Sargon and his kind, saw, heard and sensed things much differently than most of the inhabitants of this galaxy did.

The three left the elevator in silence and walked through the uniquely decorated chamber, which Telly estimated to measure about 50 meters on a side and 20 meters in height. There were various groupings of furniture consisting of sofas, tables, desks and chairs located throughout the lofty room which he figured

could accommodate several hundred groups without appearing crowded.

They passed through the odd room without speaking and entered a hall, which, in turn led to another large chamber. It was even more elegant, making the other rooms to appear shabby by comparison. The walls and ceiling were a soft white with intricate, but not gaudy, linings of gold and silver, while the floor was a polished black material resembling marble. The walls were hung with grand, beautiful paintings and tapestries, while the room itself was furnished with softly elegant pastels and white furniture. There was a wide range of growing flowers and leafy plants strategically located for a spacious and freshly clean effect.

Most impressive, however, was a fountain directly in the middle of the 400-square-meter floor. It rose 18 meters and appeared to be of some white substance similar to that on the polished black floor. The water gushed gently from delicate gold and white figures, placed artistically on the fountain's columns, falling into a 15-meter-diameter pool. The water was treated with some exotic property that made it look like a mixture of crystal clear water and a silvery mercuric substance. Encircling the fountain was a white marble-like bench that also appeared to be of the same material. The entire setting could easily be spellbinding if Telly and Arden were here for any other purpose than to capture a living Belial.

The girl made a fleeting movement that caught Telly's eye. She moved fluidly to a white, beautifully wrought writing table, and with a second graceful action, withdrew a gleaming black pistol from one of its drawers.

"Now, good sirs," she said coldly, "just who are you, and why are you here?"

Telly was momentarily dumbfounded, but recovered his senses quickly. So, they'd been found out. He considered the best way to do away with this armed opponent.

Beside him, Arden silently grasped at the sides of his dark cowl and pushed it back from his head so it rested on his massive shoulders. He then removed the tight mask, and his almost ugly face appeared, grinning.

"We are nothing but distant admirers of the soon to arrive occupant of this most singular residence," he replied.

Telly raised an eyebrow and glanced at Arden, flushing when he saw the man smiling. He turned his attention back to the girl, who smiled sweetly and replaced the pistol to its drawer.

Telly was shocked. What in Sargon's hell was going on?

"It's good to see you again, Arden. Don't worry about being overheard in these rooms, since there are no monitors of any kind here." Her smile broadened. "You've just successfully passed through the most sophisticated series of identification monitors and surveillance devices ever constructed in any one place in this galaxy. What do you say to that?"

Telly remained calm and observant through this exchange, his eyebrows raised slightly again in surprise. She looked in his direction and something inside him started to stir again.

"You two are really gutsy characters," she laughed gaily. Then sobering, she continued. "But don't take the ease of your entry lightly. It has taken me two years alone to reprogram the security system to allow for this, and you two are the first to test my handiwork. I'm sorry if you feel like a couple of lab-ruks, but there wasn't much else I could do to test the system. At least we got this far. Let's hope that the rest of your people get through as smoothly."

She was one of their contacts. She had lived all this time in this enemy fortress, constantly under surveillance, and yet somehow, she'd managed to sneak around and facilitate their entry. She was the one with guts! Some of the biggest surprises come in the littlest packages, and she was a beautiful little one at that!

She changed her tone. "Getting out of here alive with our prisoner is quite another story. I, myself, have never been close to a Belial, so I can't predict everything that might happen when we attempt to capture one. If we stick to our plan of action and if there are no undue surprises, we may have a chance to get the bastard out of here. If not, we have other plans which you and your pathfinders weren't briefed on."

"And what might they be?" Telly asked, beginning to smell a rat.

"If we buy it here, and the Belial gets away from us, the Yanna Jun will immediately descend to a point one kilometer over this building and detonate her sub-binaries. There won't be anything left but a hole 50 kilometers in diameter where this city now stands."

"I feel a lot better," Telly laughed, "now that I know you've made more solid preparations than the two weak escape plans we've rehearsed."

Ardel nodded, then, bowed. He took the girl's delicate hand in his own and kissed it gently. Then, turning to Telly, he introduced the two.

"Telakin B'Mesziah, Lieutenant of the G.C.C. Pathfinder Corps, allow me the privilege of introducing you to Sister-Magum Claren Demorah, an old and often dear friend of mine, whom I've known for more centuries than I care to remember."

Would wonders never cease? "But . . ." he started, and at Arden's nod, continued, "Your eyes?"

Claren laughed again, her voice warm and vibrant with youthful charm. "I, too, have extended contacts fused to my eyes that mask, uh, certain qualities." It was true; her eyes were clear and beautiful, but Telly could find no hint of the unmistakable glow of a Magum intellect. "Here, I'm called Cicimin Su-Tiamat, which means that I've been chosen to serve Sweet Sargon as a substitute for one of his chosen Tiamats. With your timely arrival, I've been spared the dubious honor of being defiled by him in his heavenly bedchamber."

Telly nodded, unsure of what to say. She smiled, and then stepping close, shook his hand. God, her scent nearly drove him wild, but he controlled his emotions.

"Oh, and by the way," she added, "if and when we get out of here with our reluctant guest, I have a few things to discuss with you, Telakin B'Mesziah, Lieutenant of the G.C.C. Pathfinder Corps."

Her manner put him at ease, and her effect on him seemed to diminish a bit, at least to the point that he could curtail his emotions. He relaxed somewhat, although he realized he had the same difficulty - seeing her only as a sexually attractive woman - as he had with Elfin so long ago. Hopefully, things would come into line.

The three continued their conversation for the next 20 minutes, and Claren asked all sorts of questions. From what Telly knew about Magums, he thought she should already know the answers, but he soon realized why she persisted in asking anyway. She'd been cloistered in the black camp during her entire life and had no actual contact with her allies outside the citadel. Ardel already

knew this, although he didn't share the information with Telly at the time. Claren had been in constant contact with Council Central, but they in turn, had no real means of keeping track of the resistance movement since they had no Magums among them. Thus she only knew what Council Central did.

A gentle chime sounded, and a knowing expression came over Claren's pretty face. "The fun begins shortly," she stated coolly. "Your friends are ready to be escorted here."

Telly nodded. He and Arden had impersonated the highest-ranking of Sargon's faithful guests, so they came first, in a private vehicle, while their team came together.

Claren pointed to the desk drawer. "There are weapons in there," she spoke seriously. "Don't give the Colmers a chance or they'll alert the guards of your presence. The plan is, as I understand it, is your six people will be situated to my right, and the two Colmers will be maneuvered to my left. I hope they don't screw things up."

"They won't, my Grace," Telly assured her. "They know their business."

With this, Cicimin nodded, turned, and quickly left the room. Telly and Arden removed two laser-pistols from the desk and checked them carefully. They then adjusted the focal heads to a 30-degree spread which made them dangerous to use in a crowd, but deadly to the intended victim. Stationing themselves on each side of the double entrance doors and behind decorative planters, they waited patiently.

Telly didn't hear the doors slide open, but he had a good view of the target zone from between the thick branches of an alien plant with long thin leaves. The sounds of the Praetorian Guard's white boots clicking on the hard floor alerted them to their approach, and bracing himself, he waited patiently until all nine entered and the double doors closed behind them. Cicimin led them, her head down in an attitude of reverence, as the group moved directly toward the white fountain.

Suddenly, one of the praetorians spun around. Perhaps he sensed the absence of the preceding priest and his praetorian, or possibly just an aura of danger. He pushed the priest next to him away and Telly caught a glimpse of his cold blue eyes before Arden felled him with his laser-pistol. Telly killed the sprawling priest

with a single shot, acting so quickly that he was almost unaware that he'd moved. Then it was over.

The rest of the group stopped short, then turned to one another and confirmed their identities and that of Cicimin. They quickly moved the two bodies to a disposal unit which Cicimin activated by remote control and within a few short moments both had been disintegrated.

Ardel walked over to Cicimin as she replaced a gold chip in her mouth. She'd collected the gamma-complexes of the enemy before disposing of their bodies.

"We haven't much time", she warned urgently in a low voice as he approached. "The Belial is expected to arrive within the hour, and I must meet him on his landing pad on the roof of this building. Now mark you this, the six attendants who will accompany us back here will be my agents . . . don't be fooled by their appearance. They, like me, were bred for the personal pleasure of the Belial."

"Six attendants," Telly confirmed, "are they fighters?"

"They are my sisters whose Gamma-B's have been introduced into male bodies. They are only young boys, who, although they know how to fight, are physically inferior to you pathfinders by far. They will do everything possible to confuse the Belial until your people can get a grip on him."

Cicimin moved to a hidden closet beside a large hanging tapestry where she'd secreted a store of arms and ammunition for the pathfinder team. There were also 15 protective over-sheaths and breathing units. Biological agents and poisoned gas might be used against them.

"Over the past two years I've smuggled these weapons and explosives into this building and up to these rooms by means you'd never believe possible. I also brought up the medical analyzer, compu-pads and tran-kit for your doctor, Captain Rakon, during the past ten days.

"During this phase of the operation, Moskall Rakon will be the most important member of our team. She alone has some idea of how to analyze the Belial's blood and tissue samples, to find out how to sedate him. That is, if it's possible to sedate him in the first place.

"We really have no way of knowing if this is going to work, since we've never been in any kind of contact with a Belial before,"

Cicimin explained. "Whatever course we take, we must rely on speed and surprise. Captain Rakon will have to come up with something to sedate him within 10 or 15 minutes, or we'll be faced with either moving him while he's still conscious, or killing him here. Otherwise, our fates are sealed and the Yanna Jun will be called in."

The pathfinders brought out their weapons and equipment from the closet and inspected each item before distributing it. Then, they made a complete survey of the apartment complex to ascertain their next moves and to prepare an immediate battle plan.

Cicimin Su-Tiamat lay prostrate in the cool evening air, her soft, white gown affording her no protection from the light breeze swirling over the broad rooftop landing area. She awaited the arrival of Sweet Sargon, who would land within a few moments. Only ten minutes earlier, she'd learned his true name, Meseosargon, from the broadcast made by his shuttle-yacht's captain who announced his holy name and their exact time of arrival. Something in his name stirred her memories, and she thought about the mission at hand.

"This has got to work," she thought to herself, "we have to pull this one off. I've got to make it look good, damn it, I just can't screw it up here."

This was the single most important mission she'd taken part in since she'd served as bait to lure Gensargon to his doomed fortress of Samael-Borgdragon more than 10,000 years ago. She'd been tortured there, and her mind shattered by the reigning Tiamat's psycho-shearing generator, before the fortress was destroyed by her Nashramh Sisters. Oh yes, she remembered it well. Her first encounter had been back in two-N-one when she'd been raped and tortured by the Jerden beast that'd later penetrated the Nashramh's early RAD network. At Borgdragon it was Argonites beating her senseless, then Flourtiamat tearing her mind and soul apart with her infernal machine. Tiamat didn't know what a Magum was, nor did her lord, Gensargon, but they nearly found out.

The forces of Adam Belial had captured her twice in a half million years and tortured her to death both times. Now it was her turn to capture one of the cold-blooded creatures for examination. He wouldn't be tortured; no, he would be only given one of the

most extensive and penetrating examinations that could possibly be designed by mortal minds. The Nashramh analysts would leave no stone unturned where this bird was concerned.

Claren's binary souls were reunited at a terrible cost that none cared to think about, but all were much stronger than before their forced separation. Now the real test of their revenge was about to take place.

Even if they were to fail, at this juncture, their effort had already been worth the price. The original plan for this project was proposed by a scout destroyer captain named Cecil Drubb, nearly 200 years ago, and was set into motion six months after she'd submitted her initial appraisal. Everything Claren experienced in preparing to become a Su-Tiamat was without precedent, and the sheer volume of information gained about the structure of Adam Belial's inner circle was far more extensive than anyone dreamed possible.

Prostrate and cold on the landing platform, Claren couldn't help but recall all of her long years of training and conditioning for just this moment. She'd been born into the body of a family of Colmer Lords whose bloodline was known to produce women of exceptional beauty. The gamma-B destined for her body was sidetracked by an Ansharim agent who'd substituted hers in its place. From that point on, she was strictly on her own and had to draw on all of her experience and cunning, as well as everything Council Central could add. She barely squeaked through the rigorous tests and special conditioning procedures that only ended two years ago when she'd been accepted as a trusted Su-Tiamat. Now it was time to collect her debts.

The chill breeze buffeting the landing pad suddenly warmed as Sargon's gleaming shuttle-yacht descended slowly and silently to its resting berth 100 meters away.

The night air was filled with the whispered prayers of millions of adoring and reverent voices, as Sargon's faithful subjects rejoiced at his arrival.

The sound of lightly falling footsteps alerted Cicimin Su-Tiamat that her lord and master had at last arrived.

"Arise my child, my Cicimin Su-Tiamat, you will accompany me to my quarters," rang out the child-like voice of the young Sargon.

"Praise be to my lord Sweet Sargon, my lord Meseosargon, my redeemer!" Cicimin cried out, her high voice ringing out with a

pure sense of ecstasy. At his gesture, she rose slowly to her feet and, with her head bowed, followed Meseosargon into his private elevator.

At the elevator's entrance, six naked boys lay prostrate as Cicimin had. When Meseosargon addressed them, each rose to his feet, crying out the same praises Cicimin had, in unison. Then they followed their lord into the elevator and stood in a row, to one side, with their heads bowed.

The doors closed silently.

Meseosargon tilted Cicimin's bowed head to examine her. She kept her eyes lowered a second longer, then, looked up with a fleeting glance into his. She was fascinated by what she saw.

This Sweet Sargon was no more than a boy of nine years; at least that was how he appeared, with beautiful soft white skin, short flaxen hair, and piercing blue eyes. His eyes were as cold and sophisticated as if he were a million years old and had experienced everything and forgotten nothing. There was no warmth in those strange blue eyes; no sense of morality, no compassion, only the cold sense of total and self-centered power.

She wondered what kind of intellect was behind those eyes. In all the years she'd moved among his fanatic military hierarchy, she'd never come across anything like this. He was a god and he knew it. He was to be worshiped and expected nothing less. Whatever this thing was, it had power beyond anything she'd ever experienced in a single being. Yet this creature, who thought himself a god, would soon be her prisoner, or dead.

As Meseosargon studied her coolly, Cicimin felt herself blush as, uncalled for; adrenalin began to surge into her circulatory system. He apparently had no idea that her blush was from trying to control her hostile emotions.

"Be patient, my Cicimin Su-Tiamat. You will soon begin your duties as my consort."

Cicimin began to blush again. Perceiving her emotion to be love apparently met with his approval, for he nodded and spoke. "My loving servants have done well. You are pleasing to me."

Telly motioned to Ardel, who stood on the other side of the elevator doors, with his back pressed against the wall. He made eye contact with the other team members, noting that they were ready for immediate action.

It seemed that the elevator doors had no more than opened when a young boy, dressed in a white toga, walked through them. He appeared to be a mere child who exuded a sense of sensitivity and innocence. Telly hesitated for a moment, not sure if this was the enemy or one of Claren's allies. Then, without warning, six naked boys, who had been out of sight in the elevator, sprang into action. They all attacked the boy in the toga with a ferocity that surprised Telly and the rest of the pathfinders.

The boy moved with practiced speed and precision, killing three of his attackers outright. The assault team had no doubt that he was their target. With hardly a pause, he threw the other three clear of him with expert kicks and thrusts.

Telly moved with lightning speed and struck the boy square in the face with all the force he could muster. The blow knocked the young Belial over a potted plant. As the child hit the floor, he rolled easily and came up on his feet, looking as if nothing had really touched him.

The impact of the punch nearly broke Telly's hand, but he hardly noticed it as he shot across the floor, caught the boy's toga, and swung him around and against the wall. The young Belial ducked and pulled free of the garment as Ardel caught him around the neck with a garrote, while the other pathfinders grabbed at his arms and legs, lifting him up and then slamming him face down on the stone floor.

Again the boy spun and struggled with superhuman strength, only to be held fast by the strangling garrote. The pathfinders had their hands full trying to suppress the flailing figure. Only their combined weight and strength accomplished it.

The boy had fought silently, not even acknowledging that he'd been hurt. Suddenly he opened his mouth and emitted a long, bone-chilling screech that was almost ultrasonic. The high-pitched scream echoed off the walls and tore at their ears.

"Holy damn," Telly whispered as Ardel tightened the garrote, embedding it in the Belial's skin. The thin wire only dug in and curtailed the high pitch of his voice. The terrible screeching diminished somewhat, but still tore at everyone's ears. It hurt! Cicimin winced and Ardel turned an ashen grey, although both continued to function with determination.

"He's calling for help!" Ardel managed to gasp, his body taut with the strain and sustained effort to hold onto the struggling creature with his garrote. "Boy, this kid is strong!"

Cicimin quickly cut the boy's silken underclothing off as one of the injured youths limped over and knelt beside her. The boy placed several tubes of plasti-cast compound on the floor and started applying the material liberally to the Belial's arms and legs. The other two injured boys brought additional tubes of the special compound and helped apply thin layers of the paste that quickly set to steel-like hardness.

The Belial continued to emit the high-pitched sound and ultrasonic waves. If not for the garrote around his neck, his shrieks would have broken everyone's eardrums. Both Cicimin and Ardel heard an additional level of sound, although it wasn't temporal sound that shot through the fabric of their inner minds. The brain-transmitted signals were activating all the building's defenses and alerting military security.

Small chimes began to ring in each room of Sargon's private residence, begging for their god's personal response. Receiving no acknowledgement, the 100,000 man Praetorian Guard force swung into immediate action.

Within moments the entire city was secured and the fortress itself completely sealed off from exit or entry. The thousands of ventilation fans were shut off and the air and exhaust systems secured so nothing could pass through them. Every passage, hallway, and door was automatically locked, and only specifically assigned combat groups could pass through without being vaporized. Now the assault on Sweet Sargon's personal residence would begin according to special plan X101X as approved by the lord himself. Nothing was to be left alive in Sweet Sargon's residence except for the lord himself, who was, of course, immune to all weapons systems being employed. Even with the air supply cut off, Sargon could function without oxygen for an extended period.

Once all of the layers of the body cast hardened and the Belial was immobilized, Captain Rakon inserted a special probing instrument into Meseosargon's skin near his jugular vein and extracted small sample of blood and tissue.

The skin around the puncture wound began to heal before Telly's eyes. Within seconds there appeared to have been no puncture at all.

Now the real process of analysis would begin.

Telly stepped back from the immobilized Belial to survey the situation, although Arden kept the garrote securely wound around his neck. Dove had stuffed a wadded rag into his mouth to dampen the high-pitched screeching, and Meseosargon chewed furiously at it as he tried to spit it out without success.

"All right, everyone get your over-sheaths on now!" Telly yelled out. "Dove, take over from Arden as soon as you have your gear on."

"Check!" she replied as she pulled on the tough plastic over-sheath and secured its special adhesive seams. Dove moved over to Arden then pulled her breathing gear over her head and sealed it at the neck.

"I'll take it from here, dogface. Get into your over-sheath now."

Arden relinquished the garrote to Dove without comment and immediately donned his protective gear.

Dove tightened the garrote, which Arden had let loose after the rag was stuffed in Meseosargon's mouth, allowing him no chance to begin his screaming again.

Telly directed several of his team to specific defensive locations they'd surveyed earlier. Mattice was assigned to setting demolition devices and supplying everyone with explosives and other weapons. Vuera and Dyson stayed to unpack a special metal-laced cloth in which to sheath the Belial as Telly and Ardel confirmed their plan for delaying the praetorian's entry into the apartment.

Captain Rakon, who hadn't taken part in the fight, had already donned her special gear, and was now examining the blood and tissue sample taken from the Belial's neck.

The finishing touches of tough plasti-cast were applied to the immobilized Belial; there had been enough used to contain two fully grown men, but no one knew that it would take all they had to subdue a young boy.

Next, Telly and his two team members slipped the thin, gold-impregnated body tube over the Belial, its accompanying gold headpiece strapped to one side until actually needed. The body tube, far too large for the boy, was folded and tied with plastic straps. The material was primarily gold, laced with a combination

of Belial's heavy metal encased in a matrix of the Nashramh's fusion-crystal. This was designed to contain the prisoner's gamma-complex in case he died during transit to the RAD station.

Meseosargon was obviously outwitted for the moment. Only his eyes seemed alive now, filled with a terrible rage like burning blue sapphires.

Once the Belial was covered, Vuera and Dyson went to their defensive positions. Telly was the last to leave and, as he did so, saw one of the injured young boys lie down on the floor. He coughed softly for a moment, and died.

Cicimin, straightened up from her kneeling position next to Meseosargon, walked slowly over to the child. Closing the dead boy's eyes with her slender fingers, she knelt over and kissed him gently on the lips. Then she went over to the other three boys and repeated the act.

Telly watched as she completed her sensitive task with the last boy, a lump forming in his throat. The compassion and care of this beautiful Magum for her dead companions touched him deeply. He'd forgotten, for the moment that they were Nashramh Sisters occupying boys' bodies. Cicimin loved them in a way outsiders could hardly understand; a bond of love that went beyond physical death into a dimension that Telly had only a slight inkling.

Cicimin checked the two remaining boys. They were hurt, but not critically. One had a broken arm and head wounds, while his companion had several broken ribs. She walked over to the Captain Rakon's med-kit, withdrew four packages, and returned to the injured boys. Then, with infinite care, she straightened the broken arm and tied it securely in a medical plasti-cast. The boy had fainted and she gently laid him on the floor and turned to the other injured boy. After binding his ribs with a special tape, she tended to both of their superficial wounds. They were still in a state of shock. They'd only been able to function through the capture and immobilizing of Meseosargon by sheer will-power and determination. When it was over, they both collapsed.

Telly withdrew to checkout his pathfinder's positions and guard against a forced entry. Cicimin was helping the two boys dress in their over-sheathing and didn't put her own on until they'd both been protected.

Mattice moved a litter full of explosives to each position and provided everyone with an equal share. She then placed a small

high-yield explosive device in a desk drawer and set its dual trip release. The explosive could be set off by either the slightest movement of the desk or by its preset detonating time, some 40 minutes away. Telly planned to be out of here by then.

The elevator and main entrance doors blew open with resounding explosions at the same time. Heavily armed praetorians surged out of the elevator, only to be cut down within two meters of the open doors.

Telly had situated his forces in pairs at each entrance. The rest of them hid in strategic positions. Then Mattice Izel fired an impact projectile into the open elevator, which exploded with enough force to jam the expanded platform shell against the shaft walls, immobilizing it.

The explosive force shot both upwards and downwards through the platform's deck and ceiling, killing praetorians on each floor who were tightly assembled to force their way into the apartment through the elevator shaft. A secondary shock caused by another explosion sent a fire-ball rolling out through the elevator doors, blazing over the dead enemy.

The pathfinders had already backed away, protected from the fumes by their breathing gear. Following the fire-ball, a thick green cloud of poison gas began to blow in through both entrances. The cloud quickly dissipated as the gas spread throughout the entire apartment complex.

At the front door, which the pathfinders hadn't used, Sargon's shock troops were again cut down just inside the entrance. Dyson Yokan and Dove Konissah fired impact projectiles into the exposed hallway, killing large numbers of praetorians trying to force their way through the open door. Every few minutes, they fired additional projectiles into the hallway to keep it cleared. But it would be only a short time before their reserve air and ammunition ran out, or before the enemy found a way in.

Cicimin walked over to the marble bench next to the fountain and sat down. Watching the activity around her, she opened contact with LiCu on the Yanna Jun, and with Council Central. Everything was being recorded and communications kept wide open. Nothing would be lost.

Moskall Rakon again analyzed the biopsy tissue from Meseosargon's neck. The previous test procedures recorded

contradictory and negative readings. The creature was totally alien to anything she knew. His tissue chemistry didn't register on her compu-pad's crystal memory discs.

But soon a subtle pattern began to take shape with each test, a product more of her intuition than the figures themselves. Conventional drugs didn't affect the tissue in any way. It rejected each sample as if it had an energy shield to protect it.

Something in the back of her mind reminded her that the enemy's Gamma-O's were repelled by the presence of the Nashramh's crystal-fusion process. Why she knew this, she couldn't remember. Searching her medical supplies, Moskall found a vial of Claxo-Kam 10, a derivative of the same liquid crystal used in crystal-fusion. Her hands were trembling slightly from her concerted attention and strain.

Calming herself, Moskall injected a drop of the grey Claxo-Kam 10 into the tissue sample. The tiny tissue suddenly began to oscillate, then quickly became dormant. Not dead, but just dormant.

"Hot damn, I've got it!" she piped out, "I've got the little son-of-a-bitch now!"

Moskall immediately drew ten cubic centimeters of Claxo-Kam 10, the whole vial, into a syringe and injected it into the wild-eyed Belial's jugular vein.

"If this stuff doesn't kill him, it'll sure make him think it has," she laughed in relief. "This is going to have to hold him until we get back to the Yanna Jun."

Cicimin ran over to where Moskall was working, and dropped down next to her.

"Watch his eyes," Moskall spoke excitedly, "they're starting to glaze over. See!"

Explosions from the other rooms indicated the enemy hadn't quit.

Meseosargon's head seemed unreal. His face muscles began to twitch and his eyes rolled back. In a moment he was totally unconscious. At first, he appeared to be dead, but Moskall's respiratory monitor indicated that he was alive, although nearly comatose.

"Help me with this head shield," Moskall spoke softly as the two pulled the gold-impregnated material over Meseosargon's head.

The wounded boys notified the pathfinders of the situation. Telly confirmed the facts, then, called for a retreat.

When the pathfinders returned, the Belial was secured in a tough plastic bag with carrying straps on each side.

Cicimin Su-Tiamat led the raiding party to a special room with an ornate glass cubicle in the middle of it. Telly knew there was an elevator here, but understood that only Sargon could operate it.

"This elevator leads down to the sub-basement. Once there we can move freely through a secret tunnel," Cicimin spoke quickly.

"I thought only Sargon could operate it," Telly replied as they moved the prisoner into the glass structure.

"In theory that's true," Cicimin laughed, "but I did some snooping around and discovered that it only requires his physical presence to operate the mechanism. Remember, this is his private lift, and only he can operate it by his very presence. He never does anything for himself, as I understand it, so someone else has to operate the controls. Evidently it's been designed to operate only when it senses his actual presence. Many things around here seem to be alive, or are able to function as if they were."

"Let's hope you're right, sweetie pie," Dove shot out. "I'm in a hurry, so let's get this show on the road."

Ardel was the last one in the elevator. Without a word, he pressed the down control and the cubicle dropped as if in complete free-fall.

"I hope the air supply holds out," Cicimin continued. "If anything goes wrong, the entire tube will be flooded with poison gas and the elevator stopped and locked into position."

"My god, an optimist," Dove laughed. "Look honey, this show isn't over yet. You've got little Dove here to hold your hand if things get tough."

"As I was saying," Cicimin smiled, "if the outer walls of this tube are breached, there will be alarms giving out the location and troops will isolate the area. All rooms and spaces that this elevator passes through, on each floor, are forbidden to everyone but Sargon under penalty of death."

Arden interjected, "Now where to?"

"Through a passage to Sargon's sacred reviewing arch in the park adjacent to this citadel. Again, the tunnel is accessible only with the Sargon's presence, although we'll have to pass two guard

stations at prescribed exits to where you off-loaded when you entered this building."

Telly suspected an unconscious Sargon was as good, if not better than a conscious one in this case.

"I suspect the praetorians have no idea we're in this elevator, or do they have a plan for defending it since it's in Sargon's private domain," Cicimin pointed out.

Dyson laughed. "You've got to be kidding! Nobody's stupid enough to leave the back door open and unguarded."

"I agree," Captain Rakon nodded, "we'd better expect a reception party when we reach the bottom of this hole."

"Well, we'll soon find out," Telly agreed, "I don't think they're that stupid. Prepare for a full salvo through the door as soon as this thing stops."

Ardel had been listening quietly as the pathfinders speculated about their next move. Then he tapped Cicimin on her shoulder and asked, "Why do you think they're ignorant of this elevator's potential use by intruders? It could be another weak point in their overall system and we might be in luck for awhile."

"I don't understand how these people actually think, Ardel. But, I've witnessed a number of glaring contradictions between their military expertise and actual planning. I can only chalk it up to their fanatical obedience to Sargon's will, and this is what Sargon wanted. Think about how easy it was for you to get in here. Was that rational?"

"If we don't meet with any surprises when this thing stops," Telly interjected, "we still have the guard stations between this elevator shaft and the ceremonial arch. Dove, you and Dyson cover my flanks as I move along the tunnel. Lam and Vuera will act as rear guard, and Mattice and Moskall, take charge of our prisoner. Make sure these little boys don't fall behind, Vuera."

Vuera was standing next to one of the wounded boys clinging to the handle of Meseosargon's litter. "We'll keep you kids with us. You've got guts and you're one of us," she spoke softly, patting him on the shoulder. The boy nodded and said nothing.

Within minutes they reached the bottom and the elevator slid smoothly to a stop. Everyone braced themselves, peering out through the crystal glass as the doors opened. The dark platform before them was empty.

Chapter 9

Rescue

Everything went smoothly for Telly and his combat team until they were rescued . . . then people got hurt. . . .

29:16-22 NASHIM 8304-7N5

Telly, Dove, and Dyson moved quickly and silently along the dimly lit tunnel, and made for the first guard station. They were relieved to find no enemy forces waiting for them. Possibly the element of surprise was still on their side. The rest of the assault team, and their prisoner, followed at a slower pace, allowing the three to clear their path. Only Dove and Dyson had any impact projectiles left, with nine between the two of them. Otherwise they had their laser weapons, which were of enemy manufacture, and which held extremely high-grade units capable of producing at least 400 impulses. All of the weapons still had about three quarters of their charges left.

The tunnel continued straight for 50 meters, curved and led to a ramp. Across the ramp was a console center with 25 guards. Telly paused briefly, as Dove and Dyson dropped low to the ground and continued moving forward. He signaled the others, who were still in sight about 20 meters behind, then continued toward the lighted ramp.

Moving low to the ground, Telly dodged around the ramp and, without warning, shot four praetorians with a short burst of laser fire. The alien weapons were nearly silent, so when the four fell, their comrades were momentarily confused as to what happened. Dove and Dyson, who had silently moved past the ramp, fired from

the other side, creating a deadly crossfire. Twelve more were killed outright, but the other nine swung into deadly action as they dropped and returned carefully directed fire. They moved quickly into well-protected positions without a sound, and would have had the best of the situation if Ardel and Vuera hadn't created a diversion by killing three more from a position ten meters back along the tunnel. The praetorians were good, very good. The remaining six redirected their fire for maximum effect. The only advantage the pathfinders had now was that their numbers were unknown, and they had better cover for the moment.

With a sudden move to the side, Dove leaped up onto the ramp and ran directly through the praetorians' laser fire, escaping death by a fraction of a millimeter. Within seconds she'd killed the six men and moved to the tunnel behind them to guard the rear.

As soon as the ramp was clear, the others brought in Meseosargon's sheathed body. The boys held a strap on each side of the prisoner. As fast and furious as the fight had been, Telly still had time to admire their tenacity.

A dull explosion sounded from far behind them and, almost immediately, a shock wave followed by a thick cloud of dust and debris issued from the now darkened tunnel.

"Hot damn," Moskall muttered beneath her breathing gear as the dust cloud enveloped them. Obviously the charges left in Sargon's apartment had detonated. The show wasn't over by a long sight, and she tugged at the Belial's body straps to speed their pace.

"Our high-gain bomb," Ardel stated flatly, his voice muffled by his mask. "It sounds like we lost the 90th floor, from those shock waves."

Telly noted his wrist chronometer. Their bomb wasn't set to detonate until 29:26 hours, so a praetorian must have nudged the desk containing the thermal nuclear device. Now their surprise was gone. It wouldn't take much imagination on the part of the enemy's security forces to figure they'd escaped from the apartment before the place blew. A loud communications alarm began to buzz incessantly. It was time to move out.

The three advance pathfinders abandoned the ramp and raced forward along the dark tunnel, Telly at the lead and Dove bringing up the rear. Getting to the second station before the enemy realized what happened was critical now.

A bright green laser beam shot past Telly's head and burned into the wall opposite him. Dropping to the pavement, he rolled sideways and then moved quickly forward, doubled in a low crouch, towards the unseen enemy. Dove scrambled after him. Both slid down on the hard polished pavement as a dozen shots nearly hit them. They made an invisible target in the dark tunnel, but the praetorians on the ramp and tunnel ahead of them were seasoned troops and had now zeroed in to within a few millimeters. They were probably withholding any heavier fire for fear of injuring Meseosargon.

Dyson dropped behind them, and within a few seconds fired two impact projectiles at the defending troops. He fired one of the missiles so low to the pavement that it missed Telly by a few centimeters. It slammed into the side of the ramp 15 meters ahead of him, killing the troopers firing from within the tunnel. The second missile struck just above the ramp, killing a number of the men defending it and stunning the others. The shock of the exploding projectiles in the confined area nearly knocked the three pathfinders out of their senses, but not enough to slow them down.

The three leaped to their feet and charged up onto the short off-loading ramp where the stunned praetorians were quickly coming to their senses. Telly and the other two fired with deadly precision, killing the men before they could retaliate. In all, the blasts killed 12 enemy troops and the pathfinders dispatched 26 more. They dodged and weaved through the far end of the ramp, searching for any survivors. There were none.

The rest of their party, hauling Meseosargon's body, arrived within minutes. Arden located Sargon's ornate golden tram car, which was parked in a nearly hidden siding on the far side of the ramp. It had been slightly damaged by the two explosions: all its glass was blown out, but it was operable.

The pathfinders and their allies piled aboard the ornate car and stood Meseosargon's stiff body against one corner to make more room. Telly and Dove set an impact projectile under one praetorian officer's body, and set the fuse to detonate at the slightest movement. The hidden booby-trap wouldn't stop any concerted effort on the part of the enemy, but it would alert the pathfinders to their whereabouts. Then, without a word, he, Dyson and Dove climbed on top of the tram car and lay down on the roof. From this

point Telly and Dove could command a firing position to the front and Dyson could cover their rear. The others in the car could also command a good field of fire in all directions if necessary.

Mattice operated the simple controls and moved the car out of its parking place and into the tunnel facing toward the ceremonial arch, 11 kilometers away.

The short trip took less than 10 minutes as the overloaded vehicle drove steadily along to the end of the tunnel. It stopped automatically beside another off-loading ramp. This one was totally unguarded. They were directly under the Sacred Arch of Sargon's Love, which, for some reason, wasn't considered important enough to post guards. This struck everybody as a possible trap, and they prepared for the worst. Thus far, the fight was too damned easy. There had to be something in the enemy's plans that worked well, and they had a premonition it was just beyond the ramp they were now off-loading onto.

Cicimin made for the controls of the elevator which would take them up and out into the ceremonial arch. The lights were dark and she discovered that the controls didn't work.

"Nothing is happening," she whispered urgently.

"They cut the power," Arden muttered through his mask.

"There's a stairwell here," Lam motioned as he tried the service door which was locked. Leveling his laser weapon, he cut the latch off and pushed the door open. It was dark on the other side, and there was no sign of movement.

"Well, at least they know we're here . . . or they will in short order," Ardel stated coldly. He glanced at Cicimin, who nodded back.

Telly, Dove and Dyson began to climb the steep stairs at a run, prepared for anything. Either the enemy knew where they were, and had laid a trap, or hadn't figured out what was happening yet. They would know shortly.

The rest of the group followed in their prescribed travel order, with Vuera and Lam bringing up the rear. They all pressed their way up the narrow stairwell in nearly complete darkness, with only 16 widely spaced maintenance lights offering them any relief. Each step became harder and harder for the two boys, who had no protection for their feet except for the tough plastic over-sheathing, and only children's endurance.

One of the boys, named Silva, stumbled. He struggled to his feet, gasping harshly for air through his breathing gear, never releasing his grip on the Belial's carrying strap. A moment later he stumbled again in complete exhaustion. Arden bodily picked the boy up and carried him up the stairs, the child still holding the strap.

Dyson was waiting for them as they arrived at the long stairwell's exit door, 15 stories above their starting point. The other two were scouting above for their next move.

Three dull thuds sounded along the tunnel below, indicating that their hidden booby-trap on the ramp, 11 kilometers behind them, had been tripped. The impact projectile must have detonated something bigger, since they could hear it from this distance. Whatever the case, the pathfinders welcomed the sound of destruction behind them. The game wasn't over yet.

"Everything on this level is deserted," Dyson informed them. "The boss and Dove are scouting the levels above us, so it's a good time to take a rest. The boss wants you to leave our hosts a nice present on the stairs about two flights down," he added, handing one of his remaining impact projectiles to Vuera.

"Thank you, my man," she nodded. Together with Lam, she turned and returned down the dark stairwell.

Ardel remained with Cicimin and Moskall, guarding the still unconscious Meseosargon. He'd been ordered by Council Central to kill the prisoner if capture seemed imminent; otherwise he wasn't to leave Sargon for a second until they had him safely aboard the Yanna Jun.

Telly and Dove searched the rooms on the floor above the one that their pathfinder team occupied, and were now on the reviewing balcony of the ceremonial arch. There were lights from military vehicles as far as the eye could see. They had no way to go but up. The real question was whether Dolph could get past all of this firepower in his helio-lighter as planned. Telly doubted it.

Dove climbed a metal ladder leading to the structure's roof, scouted it, and then came back down. "There's plenty of room for landing our rescue lighter, and obstacles for covering us from enemy fire."

"Good," Telly nodded, "bring them along."

"Check."

Dove moved quickly back to the waiting pathfinders and gave them Telly's orders. She then briefed them on the location of the ladder to the roof. "It would be a good idea to haul the little deadbeat up last so we don't draw attention to anyone having to come up after us."

Once they arrived, Dove suggested that a pathfinder be assigned to each of the boys and to Cicimin to protect them and to help them up the maintenance ladder.

Telly agreed readily. Then, after Dyson and Dove secured a good covering position above them, he prompted each team member's movement to the ladder until it was time for Ardel and Moskall to haul the Belial up to the roof.

Each member of the attack team moved low against the stone wall outside the door, making directly for the ladder. Vuera, Lam, and Mattice escorted their civilian charges up the ladder without missing a beat. It looked easy as they hoisted their charges up the ladder. To have let either the boys or Cicimin go alone would have taken time and possibly resulted in an accident. The ladder was only seven meters-high, but the civilians weren't in good physical condition. Besides, the boys' injured condition added to this danger.

Once the entire group reached the roof of the massive structure, Telly climbed up last. His pathfinders had already positioned everyone next to ventilator hoods so they couldn't be easily seen from the air. He moved over to where Ardel and Cicimin were guarding their still unconscious prisoner.

"Our only recourse to being blown to atoms is that Dolph will make it here in the lighter and get you and our little bastard out of here. For the rest of us, it's make a fight of it, or tough luck."

"I wouldn't worry too much about Dolph, Lieutenant," Cicimin smiled. "He's been called off. We have a better plan in the works. It'll be only a short time now."

"Trust us, Telly," Arden grinned, "we're getting everybody out of here."

Telly nodded and made his way over to Dove, who was in a rotten disposition since she hadn't been supplied with a decent transmitter, only a compu-pad with a limited frequency range.

"Forget the communications, Dove. Our allies over there have something else cooking, so alert everyone to be ready to scramble into a rescue craft on my signal."

"What the hell are they using for communications, boss?" she stared in disbelief. "Are they telepaths or some sort of crap like that?"

"Beats me," Telly grinned. "Just be a good little girl and get your frame in motion."

"Little girl, hell," Dove muttered as she ducked over to the next ventilator housing.

Vuera Cognel received her instructions from Dove, and moved around to check each team member to verify they were all in good shape. Silva and Tielan both lay prostrate next to Sargon's body, each still holding on to their carrying straps. Both boys' feet were swollen, bruised and blistered from the furious climb up the stairs. Fortunately, the tough plastic over-sheathing afforded them some protection against the stair's sharp edges. She whispered a caution against removing their over-sheaths.

"Don't worry, kids, if we get a rescue aircraft over us, we'll carry both of you to it. Don't try to walk any more. Now that you're off your feet, they'll swell up and make walking impossible. So, just wait for us to take the initiative. Okay?"

Both boys nodded and tried to smile.

"Good." It made her wonder to see these lovely little boys taking part in, what was without a doubt, a suicide raid. Even the cute little blonde, Cicimin, was nearly crippled by swollen feet. Whoever they were, they sure had guts, and she respected guts.

Blinding searchlights swept over the huge ceremonial arch, casting deep shadows over the top, where the assault team crouched behind ventilator housings. Dove, Mattice, and Moskall had taken off their priests' robes and placed them over the three civilians to protect them from the cold.

The three women removed their robes back in Sargon's apartment and donned their over-sheaths. Then they'd dressed in the robes again to confuse the enemy if they came face to face with them. The device worked for Dove when she stormed the six praetorians back at the first off-loading ramp. The enemy troopers hadn't shot her instantly, giving her the edge. The enemy's conditioned reflexes had served the raiders well.

The sound of moving armor below the arch indicated the troops were moving closer. Possibly they'd guessed that the assault team was either in or on the structure.

Telly calmly watched as air traffic over their position intensified. He wondered if they were afraid of hitting their sacred little god, or weren't yet sure if anyone was on top of the arch. They had high-gain infrared scanners and other night-vision devices, so something else was probably holding them back. Then he saw his answer in the west. There were hundreds of slow-moving aircraft, mounting rows of floodlights, moving directly for them. The enemy had discovered their location.

Suddenly, fantastic green laser bolts, larger than anything Telly had ever seen before, lit up the sky and burned through everything they touched. Amazingly, the armor in the park around them, the statues, buildings, and everything else was being destroyed. "My god!" he thought in dismay, "these people'll do anything to get their god back, even destroy their capital city in the process."

Explosions sounded all around the ceremonial arch, shaking it to its foundations. Telly felt Dove's shoulder next to his as the lurching deck knocked them together. Blinding flashes, dust, and debris flew everywhere and it seemed as if the end was near.

"Hoo ha," Dove yelled in his ear, "I do think we've won the popularity contest. Wow! What a show!"

Dove grabbed Cicimin and pressed her between Telly and herself for protection. The other pathfinders covered the two boys with their own bodies. The sheer ferocity of the attack kept everybody's heads down and didn't allow for any return fire, at least not for the moment.

Then there was a complete cessation of fire and everything went pitch black. Telly's hair stood on end under his over-sheath hood and face gear, as an intense electro-magnetic flux permeated everything around the arch. Then he actually felt an immense presence as it moved over them and eased to a halt.

"Prepare to move out!" Ardel's voice thundered. "This is our ship. Prepare to move out!"

A bright beam sliced through the charged darkness as a hatch, no more than two meters above them, slammed open. Six bodies hurled out of the open hatch as the light blinked out, and a woman's voice shouted, "Come on, let's get the hell out of here! Get the prisoner in first!"

The Yanna Jun's sergeant-at-arms and five grey-uniformed security women pulled a ladder down behind them, directing everyone up it.

"Come on! Move it!" Sergeant Mayer yelled, "In! In! In!"

Telly was never so surprised in his life. Only the familiar voice of the Sergeant-at-Arms saved him from firing at the dark figures in the first place, and her presence seemed to spur their action. Within moments everybody was pulled into the darkened airlock and the hatch slammed shut and secured. Everyone tumbled back against the aft bulkhead as the Yanna Jun shot forward at full thrust.

Dim chem-lights blinked on and Una Mayer counted noses. She showed no surprise on seeing Cicimin and the two wounded boys. LiCu had briefed her.

Telly could hardly believe it. Neferah actually brought her 753-meter-long scout destroyer down to the surface to rescue them. He found later that Dolph, and the surviving resistance people, had returned to the Yanna Jun with Liskel Faalin and his prisoners. Neferah and LiCu decided that no other plan had any chance. Only bringing the scout destroyer down for the actual pickup made any real sense.

The scout destroyer surged and buckled, throwing everyone back and forth against the unresisting bulkheads.

The dull red battle lights cast ghostly shadows as the sergeant-at-arms bellowed, "Pathfinders to your quarters. Rakon, Ardel, Demorah, and the prisoner to the ship's brig, follow Sister Quilot and me! Lieutenant B'Mesziah, you go to the bridge!"

The ship continued to pitch and shudder. Everyone tried to get out of the airlock into the passage way. The pathfinders picked up the two dazed boys and hauled them along to their ATQ suite. Captain Rakon and the two Magums went with Una to the brig with Meseosargon, and Telly made his way forward to the ship's bridge.

Telly did his best not to lose his footing. The bumps and jolts threw him from side to side as he bounced off the smooth metal walls of the long passage. He finally reached the first vertical ladder leading to the bridge deck, grabbed it for dear life, and slowly and painfully climbed hand over hand to the next deck. He had to wind his arms and legs around the metal ladder to keep from being torn away by the wild bucking of the soaring warship.

Once he reached the bridge deck, he tried again to get his footing. All around him he could hear the groaning and occasional agonized screams as the ship strained against the torsion and shear of the terrible forces exerted against it. Before he could get a firm footing, another violent lurch sent him headlong down the empty corridor and crashing against a closed hatch. His head reeling, Telly grabbed desperately at a hatch-dog and held on.

He realized he'd broken his nose. The blood was interfering with his breathing gear. Shaking his head to clear it, he used his free hand to pull off his over-sheath hood and breathing gear. Now he could get his breath back and continue on to the bridge.

Turning to the hatch, he came face to face with the letters of a sign that read: BRIDGE: Authorized Personnel Only.

Telly continued to hold onto the hatch-dog as the ship buckled and lurched, her metal beams twisting and squealing like voices of a thousand women in terror. Then, with great effort, he worked his way to a standing position and opened the hatch. Pulling himself through, Telly somehow secured the hatch and pulled himself along a metal rail to the first unoccupied battle seat in sight. Forcing himself into it, he wrenched the seat's restraining straps over his shoulders and secured the tiedown clasp.

Once in place, he pulled open his lower over-sheath and removed a soft handkerchief from his uniform to stop his bleeding nose. Funny, he hadn't even gotten a scratch on the mission. Now that he was back on friendly territory, he was having the stuffings kicked out of him.

The ship twisted and turned again and again, and Telly suddenly realized that the gridscreen was looking at the surface of the planet - from only about 30 meters off the ground! They were moving at far above supersonic speeds and dodging low hills and surface structures. Holding the wet handkerchief over his still bleeding nose, Telly could see Neferah in her command chair, piloting the scout destroyer's wild course low over the dark terrain. She was flying this spaceship like it was a ground pursuit fighter. "My god," he thought to himself, "this woman has guts!"

Just how the spacecraft was holding together was a mystery. It wasn't built for this kind of torsion and frictional heat. Neferah was taking the Yanna Jun below the enemy's search radar and other tracking systems.

Then, with a blinding change of color on the gridscreen, the SD Yanna Jun shot out over a glistening blue sea, lit by the morning sun peeking over the horizon. Just as suddenly, she pulled upward and climbed nearly straight up towards the blackness of space, still twisting and spiraling.

Telly watched, agape, amazed by the stunning scene, nearly forgetting his bleeding nose. "There's no question about it," he mused to himself, "we're getting out of this mess in one piece. Wow!"

The scout destroyer cleared the shimmering blue and white atmosphere of Sargon's outpost communications world and entered into the void.

Cloaking and protective shields were energized. They sent out streams of charged particles from the thin upper layers of gas. Damage reports from all over the ship began pouring into the bridge's comm-link, but Neferah, still piloting, ignored them. Meanwhile, the ship's first officer, on the lower bridge, worked quickly to determine the warship's combat posture.

"We're still in the game!" she reported to the captain, her voice high and tinkling. "Robel drive in sync; navi-computer in sync; weapons systems armed and primed; no major structural failures; hull integrity intact. . . ." She continued to read off a list of combat readiness data.

Telly was impressed by the cool efficiency of the Nashramh officers in action, especially since the G.C.C. knew nothing about their fleet capabilities. In fact, it was a common belief in the G.C.C. hierarchy that the Nashramh's actual fleet was commercial freighters and armed fighter-lifeboats. The small size of their scout destroyers, and their refusal to allow any G.C.C. naval personnel aboard them, added to this myth. Well, these women acted as if they were used to a great deal of combat.

Neferah barked, "Maximize shields!" The Yanna Jun shuddered as she cleared the upper atmosphere and stopped spinning. Suddenly, their sense of movement ceased and only the sounds of the ship's ventilation fans and other normal operating equipment could be heard.

"Enemy vessels around the clock!" the CIC officer's voice sounded over the comm-link.

"Openings," Neferah queried as the Yanna Jun closed in on the dark masses of 30 enemy battle cruisers guarding this quadrant.

They loomed closer as the seemingly invisible ship gained speed, and Telly couldn't see any negotiable space between them.

"One point zero seven four."

"I've got it!"

Neferah didn't veer more than a fraction of a degree from her present course, continuing straight for the mammoth enemy cruisers. Telly came to the sudden realization that she planned to attack them!

Just over 180 kilometers in length and 90 in diameter, the first enemy cruiser loomed closer, apparently unaware of the Yanna Jun's deadly presence.

"Torpedo group one, fire," she ordered evenly into her open comm-link. "Mine sections one and two, 60, on an even spread, laser sections, 20-20 spread, now!"

"Confirmed," several voices sounded through the comm-link.

Ten bright flashes lit up the side of the nearest enemy cruiser, now less than 100 kilometers away, spreading vein-like electrical tendrils over its unscreened surface.

Neferah continued straight for the affected strike zones, closer, closer. . . .

Telly was pressed back, deep into his battle seat as Neferah finally pulled away at the last possible moment and skimmed along the enemy vessel's black surface at less than three meters. The Yanna Jun was traveling the length of the enemy ship and the hard metallic sounds of thermal mines ejecting from the port and starboard launchers overshadowed everything else. In a moment, the scout destroyer shot out on the other side of the dark ship, bright explosions erupting behind her, and made for the next target in line.

Closing in on the second battle cruiser, the Nashramh vessel made exactly the same kind of attack, beginning with a barrage of Sub-Spec laser fire and M-Therm torpedo canisters, followed by a spread of M-Therm mines. Everything happened with absolute precision, almost as if the crew had done this a thousand times before. The enemy warship was trying to raise his energy shields, but the Yanna Jun cut right through them and pressed on with her concerted attack.

Pulling out on the far side of the second enemy warship, the scout destroyer fired a spread of 600 M-Therm mines in all

directions, then, made for her escape between groups of outlying vessels.

Blinding flashes lit up the void as the Magna-Therm mines impacted and detonated against the outer formation of enemy battle cruisers. This diverted their attention from the escaping scout destroyer, which they could neither see nor detect on their search radars.

"Engage Robel insert sequence, now!" Neferah barked out. The gridscreen changed color from black to a deep purple as the craft dropped into the first level of sub-binary insertion.

"Helm, you have permission to take control," the captain spoke softly into her comm-unit.

"Helm in control," a voice from below replied.

Telly suddenly realized that the action was over. The sub-binary drives synchronized, and they dropped out of temporal time and space. Apparently the captain had preset her navigational coordinates and planned to attack the enemy on the way out to her jump-off point. The cat woman was one of the best commanders he'd ever encountered. "What new surprises have we got in store for everybody now?" he thought, not quite sure the action was really over.

Neferah spoke quietly into her comm-link, too softly for him to hear, then, unstrapped herself from her command chair. She was sticky with sweat, and her eyes glowed with a sense of triumph as she walked casually over to Telly. He noted, though, that she absentmindedly rubbed her right arm and walked with a definite limp.

She stared down at his swollen and bloodshot eyes, noting his now dark red handkerchief.

"Well now, Barfbrains. What's this nonsense about your trying to batter holes in my ship's bulkheads with your head? My, my, but you're a mess . . . a real mess."

Telly smiled weakly under his handkerchief. "I tried. God knows I tried. Besides, I like being a wee bit ruffled."

Neferah smiled and extended her hand. Her cat-like eyes glowed as she shook his hand.

"After all of these years," she whispered in a soft voice. "After all of these years I meet Jenn's beautiful son, Telakin B'Meszhiah, out here in the middle of the void. And he has to be one of the toughest damned pathfinders in the corps at that."

Her eyes began to glisten although her mouth tightened for a moment. Telly just stared at her.

"I thank the Creator that you got back alive, Kin. I'd have detonated this ship over that damned city if they'd gotten you. Believe me, to think that Jenn's son, after all these long years."

Telly nodded. A buzzer sounded and Neferah turned to her command chair. "We'll talk together later . . . okay?"

"Okay," he answered, slightly disoriented and mystified by her words and sudden change of attitude. As she walked slowly back to her chair, he noticed her limp was accentuated, probably by fatigue.

Within a few moments, the Yanna Jun broke back into temporal space reset her heading, then, dropped back into the sub-binary. She repeated this maneuver 15 times before dropping down through the seven steps into the plasma layer of sub-binary space, and continued undisturbed to her destination.

Arden Ardel finished debriefing with LiCu and the Captain and was joined by Cicimin in the main conference room. Sister Mayer, who stood next to the hatch, came to attention as Cicimin entered the room, limping slightly, and bowed as she passed. It was no secret now that there were three Magums aboard, though it wasn't disclosed before the final pickup at Sargon's ceremonial arch.

"At ease, Sergeant," Neferah spoke, turning to meet her sister and pulling out a chair for her. "How are your feet doing my Grace?"

"Quite well, thank you."

Cicimin sat down and leaned back comfortably. "We should begin now, Captain B'Tziah, if you please."

"They're on their way, my Grace."

"I understand you had a bit of an identification problem with our team, Sergeant Mayer," Arden grinned.

"If you mean that situation with our praetorian friend, yes. I damn near had a hemorrhage when this blond, blue-eyed buffoon in a praetorian Colonel's uniform walks past me carrying an enemy laser. I'd never laid eyes on him before. I recognized all the others right away, but not this guy. Boy was I surprised when I discovered I was challenging a woman! That Vuera really fooled me and I can see why the enemy didn't have a chance. Those pathfinders are really good."

"That's the longest statement you've made in ten years, Una. Could it be that you're just a bit impressed?" Neferah chided.

"You might say that," she glowered. "When Vuera left this vessel, she looked like a woman despite her combat gear. I wasn't prepared for the complete transformation, but then I learned a good lesson."

The pathfinder team arrived, bringing the injured boys with them, and took their assigned seats at the conference table. Sergeant Mayer nodded glumly to Vuera when she passed and their eyes met, and remained silent.

Neferah stood and gestured towards the two Magums. "These people are a bit more than we've let on either before or during your raid on Sargon's fortress. We've kept you in the dark on a few items for security reasons, although they have nothing to do with your trustworthiness. It's just a matter of our Nashramh battle procedures. So to begin with, allow me to introduce you properly to Brother-Magum Arden Ardel of the Ansharim Brotherhood and Sister-Magum Claren Demorah of our Sisterhood. As you can see from Sister Claren's uniform, she's a senior admiral and I suspect if the truth were admitted, Brother Arden is of similar rank. I also understand you've been apprised of the fact that Silva and Tielan are members of our sisterhood who've been impressed into male bodies by a process I don't understand."

She stopped speaking for a moment, then, added, "We want you to surrender Silva and Tielan to our own medical team. They are our sisters and thus part of our organization. Do I make myself clear on the matter?"

The pathfinders who'd remained silent, all nodded, but without enthusiasm. For some reason they'd adopted the boys and considered them as part of their pathfinder team. "Now, are there any questions?"

"So what's this big deal about a Magum?" Dove asked. "I've never heard of one, so what're we to do? Jump up and salute or something like that?"

"A good question," Arden interceded. "Let it suffice that we're so far different from you and your team members, by both our ages and cumulative experience, as to require that our identities be kept secret. That's why we're informing you of the facts. If you know that we're radically different and this is a fundamental security concern in both of our organizations, you will take care not to

disclose the fact to the G.C.C. or anyone else. We can't order you to remain silent on the matter, but we trust your special sense of values and loyalty. We're not a threat to the G.C.C., but we are to the enemy. The less he knows the better."

"So you think our G.C.C. people aren't trustworthy?" Mattice shot out.

"The G.C.C. is a big organization with a lot of unknowns in their midst. And, yes, there've been incidents where our secrets have been leaked to the enemy from the G.C.C. Navy and their other organizations. It's an unfortunate fact of life and is a real problem. So, let your individual consciences be your guides. Now let's get on to our debriefing procedure."

Chapter 10

Ghosts

An apparent victory over a common enemy doesn't change matters of dispute between allies, especially if they are fundamental issues. Then, too, things surface which are beneficial to some. . . .

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Claren sat back comfortably on the couch and laughed gaily to herself. The past weeks were so relaxed and easy that she almost felt like a young girl again. The mission had succeeded, and she was overcome with elation. She felt she and her associates had struck a solid victory for their side. It was about time Belial's Legions of Light were on the receiving end of another disaster. Now the real fun would begin!

"You may not believe it, but this is the first time I ever felt happy about being beat up, even if it was by a good old scout destroyer named after a dear friend. It's taken me a full week to realize that I'm really out of that antiseptic hellhole, and we've finally evened up the score with our damned nemesis, Samael. God knows he misses his dear little boy, Sweet Meseosargon. Oh yes, miss him he does."

Telly sat across from Arden, who had his feet propped up on a low serving table. The three were sitting in the officer's lounge waiting for the captain to bless them with her somewhat overbearing presence.

Claren looked over at Telly and continued. "You may not know it, Lieutenant, but I've been involved with this project for two centuries now, at least on this last phase of our operation to

capture a Belial. More than 10,000 years ago I was involved in an operation to assassinate one of his chosen sons, which was, I am happy to say, a success. If only we could have captured that one, Gensargon, maybe this whole damned conflict would be over by now. But then, who knows what will come out of this raid."

She measured Telly evenly as he stared back at her.

"I don't expect there'll be any retaliation for the time being because they're still running around in circles trying to figure out what happened, but they won't be quiet for long. What they'll do once they've appraised the situation and received instructions from Kutulusargon, will definitely make an unforgettable ripple in our peaceful lives."

Telly smiled innocently and gazed at her beautiful face and figure. Not just lovely, like Elfin, or Chevoni, but incredibly young, innocent, and sensual. Now that his mind wasn't diverted by the mission of capturing a Belial and surviving until rescue, he could center his attention on her. Telly was so completely enamored by her soft lines that he didn't quite catch the drift of what she was saying.

Laughing, Claren turned to Arden. "I see our young man is more enchanted by the creature comforts my body has to offer than by what I have to say."

"Could this be?" Arden leered over at Telly. "Could it be our distinguished Lieutenant is thinking nasty thoughts?"

Telly suddenly realized he'd been daydreaming, and was now the butt of some sort of chiding. He grinned and laughed.

"So you'd rather roll around in bed with me, Lieutenant B'Mesziah," Claren smiled, looking him straight in the eyes. "I do believe you've been ignoring my tale of past deeds."

She felt young and giddy enough to tease him just a bit. It might just be fun to enjoy her youthful body now that she could put it to some use other than being Sargon's toy. Actually, Telly was rather cute and under different circumstances might just be a lot of fun being around. She could see why individuals at Council Central were so impressed with this young man.

"I guess my attention was elsewhere," Telly grinned without batting an eyelid. "It's true that such thoughts passed through my mind, but you needn't worry, my Grace. I am, believe it or not, one of those strange creatures who believe in strict personal restraint in such matters. You are, though, the most lovely and sexually

attractive woman I've ever come in contact with. You definitely have an arousing effect on me. Your very youth and beauty makes it difficult for me to even think of you as holding any kind of ancient grudges, or having personally taken part in such dangerous ventures."

"So, you think I'm too young to bear ancient grudges?"

"No. I understand something in theory of what a Sister-Magum is. But I admit that I still have an intellectual block when it comes to applying my knowledge to you. Let's face it, when I look at you, and the overt sexuality of your presence, I can't be anything other than enamored."

"Tell me, Lieutenant, how much do you know about Nashramh history and lore?" Arden broke in as he eyed Claren closely.

Telly downplayed his past role with the Nashramh, although, to tell the truth, he didn't know much more than he'd actually experienced as a boy. "I've read a little in school and heard a few stories from acquaintances. Otherwise I don't know much about your history at all."

The lounge hatch swung open. Captain B'Tziah entered and surveyed the group with more warmth than she'd previously shown. She gracefully seated herself on the couch next to Telly.

"Don't interrupt your conversation on my part," she purred, "I won't bite." She leered good-naturedly at Telly. "You aren't afraid of me, are you, Lieutenant B'Meszhiah?"

Telly shifted his attention to her, although he still found himself preoccupied with Claren's arousing beauty. Apparently Neferah mistook his discomfort as having something to do with her arrival.

"You should be worried about just that," Arden laughed and then growled. "All cats have sharp teeth and claws, and these Tzians are all the more dangerous when you raise their ire."

"Speak for yourself, dog-breath," Neferah glared. "I won't mention what disgusting habits you and all of your canine types have unless you provoke me further."

Seeing their old animosities were coming to the surface again, Telly tried to salvage the situation by bringing up something from out of his past. "So you're from Tziah, Captain? I had an instructor back in my pathfinder training days who was a Tzian. Her name was Kruminah, and," he reflected for a moment, "she was the best-prepared and most knowledgeable instructor I ever had. In fact,

she probably knew more about the Legions of Light and their military strategies than anyone else. She was really amazing."

"From Tziah," Neferah asked, her curiosity aroused. She hadn't actually been there since she was a small child.

Arden interrupted again. "You appear to be disturbed, my dear Claren," he spoke a little too loudly. "Could something be bothering you?"

Telly glanced back at the girl, noting her lovely face was clouded over by some inner concern. "Now just what the hell is going on?" he thought to himself.

"I take it that Kruminah's name brings up memories and opens some old wounds, does it?" Arden pressed on, his eyes glowing like embers.

Claren's face darkened, making her appear much older. "You," she replied coldly, "are very astute for a dog!" Her lovely blue eyes were glowing with a terrible wrath that drew Telly's attention away from her sensuality.

He glanced over at Neferah, who nodded subtly; both realized that something out of the ordinary was happening. This was more than the good-natured banter that took place earlier between her and Arden, which made it appear they were enjoying themselves. In fact, Telly now got the distinct impression that they were actually deadly enemies. Whatever the case, Arden was bent on bringing some old grudge to a head, with both Telly and Neferah acting as witnesses.

"That doesn't answer the question, does it my dear?" Arden pressed.

Claren turned to face Telly and Neferah, who remained tactfully silent. She pursed her lips as if contemplating a decision, then nodded and began to speak.

"This discussion about Kruminah, isn't between myself and Arden Ardel, it's really a festering issue that's stood between us for longer than I care to remember. It is, moreover, an issue between our Nashramh's Council Central and the Ansharim, for the questions it raises transcend our personalities and encompasses the binding philosophies of both of our organizations from the very top to the bottom."

"That is an understatement, my dear. . . ."

"Don't interrupt me, Arden!" she shot out coldly. "Or I'll probably say or do something that both I and my Council Central will regret later."

Arden didn't appear the least bit intimidated by her threat, although he ceased to speak for the time being.

"Before I address the subject of Kruminah B'Tziah, I must tell both of you that this discussion will deal with matters and personalities you are forbidden to discuss outside this group. I don't know why it is that Arden or his Council Central have determined to pursue this matter here and now, but I suspect the intertwining thread of Miriam B'Mesziah, with whom we and both of you have been deeply involved, has something to do with it. And then, it could have something to do with your special destinies and . . . oh yes, you two are special to one another and to our sisterhood."

"Miriam?" Telly thought out loud, also noting the surprised expression on Neferah's face. Was this the same person Phel had spoken of, and how did Neferah fit in? None of this was making any sense. . . .

"About this Sister Kruminah B'Tziah whom you met during your pathfinder training days, Lieutenant, she is a very old acquaintance . . . no, not an acquaintance, but a victim of mine. I knew her by the name of Sahlie Lor and I was her persecutor for nearly a quarter of a million years."

Neferah started, the enormous time period barely sinking in. "How long did you say?"

"Oh yes," she laughed bitterly, "A quarter of a million long years. Now do I still seem so young and sexy, Lieutenant?"

Telly remained silent, flushing slightly. Whatever these two Magums and their Councils Central had stuck in their craw, he wasn't going to get in the middle of it, if Neferah wanted to join in, the more the merrier.

"First of all, my young friends," Claren continued, "this canine creature and I are both, as you know, Magums. I'm sure you both realize that we are old and complex personalities who inhabit corporeal bodies in your present time and space. Suffice it to say we are a great deal more than we seem on the surface."

Neferah nodded, while Telly remained passive.

"This woman Kruminah, for that's her original name, was known to both me and my sisterhood for nearly 150,000 years, as

Sahlie Lor. That is, before we discovered who she really was. Initially, we thought she was a Jerden infiltrator from Belial's Legions of Light, because of a complex and confusing set of circumstances coupled with our ignorance of the black ones' limitations. In this respect we were sadly mistaken." Claren's voice was clearly bitter and her features seemed to age before Telly's eyes.

"Because of this misconception, we thought there were also other Jerdens working in our midst. Our plan was to simply allow this suspected Jerden to believe he was successful in penetrating our organization, and to let him betray his fellow infiltrators. We provided him, or as it turned out to be, her, with a female body to which we attached the code name of Sahlie Lor. We went so far as to condemn this innocent woman to a living hell on a prison world which is remembered by the infamous name of Shamshoah.

"Life cycle after life cycle, we introduced her into different female bodies and baited her with all sorts of undesirable assignments in our outer rim fleet. Our plan was twofold. We wanted to make her believe that our sisterhood was an obsolete and inferior organization, and to coax her into betraying her associates. We only afforded her a marginal education at our training academies and assigned her to outmoded scout destroyers on the fringe of our fleet operational zone. At one point, we thought we'd built an adequate case that warranted disposing of her, so we tried her on circumstantial evidence, found her guilty, and hanged her."

Telly glanced at Neferah, who stared at Claren with rapt attention.

"To add to the degradation of the woman," The girl went on stiffly, "I and my associates at Council Central continued to persecute her even after it had been proven beyond all doubt that she was not only innocent, but also an intensely loyal sister. She was, in fact, so loyal that she overcame all personal resentments against us and volunteered to sacrifice herself in the project of infiltrating Samael-Borgdragon's black wall with the first wave of our Nashramh martyrs."

Arden sat leaning forward, as if poised to attack, his eyes still glowing like hot coals.

"I suspect you know about Samael-Borgdragon Estate?" Claren asked, looking at Telly. Both he and Neferah nodded.

"Did you know that the very fabric of that wall was made up of the bodies and souls of billions of slaves? Their bodies were pressed into it while still alive, and the wall itself became a living thing. Both Miriam and Sahlie Lor were the first of our sisters to become victims of that vile process, and Sahlie was the very last soul to leave it. Yes, the very last one to leave. I take it that Arden knows about this entire story from his own foul sources."

"Not foul sources, my dear," Arden replied menacingly. "I met Sahlie back in one-N-one, when I had the living crap beaten out of me by some of your more enlightened sisters. She was the only civilized Nashramh sister I ever met until Miriam B'Meszhiah came along. I met Sahlie again after she'd been exonerated by your, ah . . . shall we say somewhat illegal means. She was still being persecuted by your compassionate sisters. You remember the time of her stroke, don't you?" His voice was equally bitter, and a strange expression shone in his eyes.

Both Telly and Neferah remained silent, seemingly forgotten by the two hostile Magums. This was over their heads. Other than the obviously bitter undercurrents, neither recognized anything except for the name of Miriam B'Meszhiah.

They both realized Claren was essentially speaking to Arden, and it really didn't matter to her whether or not they were present. There was an important point being made, but Telly didn't understand what it was.

Claren nodded slowly, reflecting on something that neither Telly nor Neferah could guess at. "So that was you," she stated flatly. Now she remembered him. Moreover, she understood why he was so adamant about discovering the truth of this matter. She hadn't been present at the time, but had read the reports. "So, our old sins come back to haunt us," she thought to herself.

"I told her then, and I repeat it now, 'we know who and what you are, Sahlie Lor, and we accept you as one of us even if the Nashramh doesn't want you.' That was shortly before she died and I was leaving her ship. She was totally paralyzed and could only blink her eyes to show that she understood me. As for her wonderful shipmates. . . ."

"There is no need to rub it in, Arden. We're all too aware of our shortcomings."

"Really?"

Neferah couldn't contain herself any longer. "I don't have the slightest idea of what you two are talking about, but I do know a Miriam B'Mesziah. Did you know her too, Arden? And when would that have been?"

He relaxed slightly, his glowing eyes softened and began to dim a bit. "Why, yes, I knew a young elf girl by that name. Let's see now. Yes, I met her first when I was a pathfinder like young Telakin here, and we were on our way to make a raid against Samael-Agtren Estate. Also I met her again many thousands of years later when my ship was destroyed in a skirmish. She was assigned to a Nashramh scout destroyer named the . . . ah, Klikah-Lal, just before the Great Conflagration. Yes, she was . . . and is very special to me. Does this sound like the same person you are thinking of?"

Neferah sat back for a long moment, saying nothing. Then, with an odd expression on her face she nodded her head. "I . . . I'd always tried to think of them as just day-dreams, except for little Jenn. She was always too real to be just a figment of my imagination. I guess I knew they were all really memories I couldn't quite grasp. Names, places, and things I'd done. I even went so far as to look up many of them in Nashramh reference books." Leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, Neferah continued. "Miriam B'Mesziah was a close friend of mine and she was on the SD Klikah-Lal for a number of years. And I . . ." Shaking her head, she stopped speaking, for her throat was now dry and constricted.

"Well, now that we're dragging up the past, let's hear the rest," Claren smiled, glad for the respite in her own painful memories. "You were saying?"

Neferah flushed, coming out of her private memories, her scars standing out prominently on her yellowish skin. "I had another friend, as I said, whose name was Jenn. God! I can never forget her. Her name was actually Jennanine B'Mesziah and she was an elf . . . a Low Elf from Mesziah, and she was the closest friend that I ever had . . . ever."

"And she had a son named Telakin," Claren prompted.

"Yes, she called him Kin," Neferah continued, not realizing just what Claren said. "He was killed at the very beginning of the conflagration." Telly felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle and stand out as Neferah stared unblinking at him. "I never had a chance to know him personally but the way Jenn talked about him

indicated he was very special and that she adored him. A part of her died when he was killed. He was killed on a G.C.C., no - an Odomak lead destroyer named the Constance."

Telly now understood what the captain was talking about back on the ship's bridge when she called him 'Kin'. She knew all along, but wouldn't admit it to herself. She in turn paused, thinking to herself as if she was alone, and the others waited silently for her to continue. Telly wanted to speak out and interrupt her, but kept quiet.

Neferah smiled to herself, a truly beautiful smile that shone through her scarred and hard feline face, "My sweet little Jenn . . . God, how I loved that funny little elf. When we were children, Miriam used to tell us her never-ending story that turned out to be a compendium of Nashramh lore and moral instruction."

She stopped and seemed to withdraw into herself as she spoke about her past memories. "We were children together at a place called Ling Wall Academy. That was where I first met Jenn. I was so frightened when I left my home world of Tziah and it seemed as if my entire life would be lonely and miserable from that day on. Jenn was my very first friend. Miriam was a little older than we were, but acted more like a mother to us. As Jenn would say that Miriam knew everything, and she was right. Miriam did."

Then she paused again, her eyes glistening. "Jenn was the most innocent and kind human being I've ever met, and she was my best friend of all . . ." her voice trailed off bitterly.

Telly listened to what Neferah was saying and knew he'd heard a similar never-ending story, but he couldn't quite remember the details.

"And, go on," Claren urged, her eyes glowing softly. "Let it all out, my dear."

Neferah just glared at Claren and nearly spat, "I could never get over the fact that she was lost out in the void during the conflagration. I know there were billions lost, but Jenn was someone special. . . ."

Telly now had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. All of this sounded too familiar, all except the part about his mother being lost out in the void.

"Well," Claren smiled. "We started this conversation with my true confessions of my past depravations, and now you've just added a new dimension by awakening to your own past. We have,

all of us in this room, lived in different corporeal bodies as both of you are just beginning to realize. You can remember bits and pieces of your past matrix-regeneration cycle now, and will soon remember much more. This emerging memory, you will find, is both a blessing and a curse. You can learn much from your past mistakes, but conversely you are saddled with the loss of dear and trusted friends whom you will miss to the point of distraction. We Magums and our other confederates, who are formal binaries, are cursed with uninterrupted memories of all our past matrix-regenerations. I too have lost thousands of my dear friends, many of whom have shared more than one lifetime with me. Most of my closest friends who were lost during the conflagration have never been found, and may never be."

Neferah shook her head, not choosing to believe that Jenn would never be found again.

Claren glanced at Ardel who was smiling to himself, for he knew what she was going to say next. "Why don't we end this conversation on a high note? First, my dear Captain B'Tziah, we Magums have an unlimited source of knowledge which you don't understand. Nevertheless, as our hairy dog here already knows, what I'm about to say is true."

Neferah focused her attention back on Claren, as did Telly.

"Your little friend, Jennanine B'Mesziah, was lost on one of the primitive rimworlds after the final battles were fought. She and her shipmates have been recovered and entered into another matrix-regeneration cycle. In fact, she's been reunited with Miriam, who is also a Magum. And, uh, let me see . . . you should also know that this young Lieutenant here, Telakin, is indeed the same person born to your friend Jenn. I understand that he, too, has recurring memories of his past, before the conflagration."

The two stared at one another, each knowing that what Claren said was true.

"Who the hell is this woman?" Telly thought to himself. She was starting to play at his sensibilities. Claren knew more about his past than he did. God, he wanted to talk to her alone and find out more about him self and how Neferah fit in.

"Have we added a new dimension to our otherwise dour conversation?" Arden asked, smiling slightly. "Now back to where we left off, my dear Claren. High note or not, we haven't resolved the issue that we began with."

"You damn son-of-a-bitch!" Claren retorted. "Can't you let the past rest?"

"Not in this matter. I want to know why you women of compassionate justice continued to persecute a fellow sister that you knew to be loyal and true."

Both Telly and Neferah were surprised by this flare-up of the original argument. It must be of real importance to generate such animosities between the two Magums.

"Why do we do anything?" she retorted, "Obviously from habit or necessity."

"So?"

"So what, just what is it you're fishing for? I've answered your damned question. Now let's drop the subject."

Looking at Telly and Neferah, who were both confused by the situation, Arden directed his attention to them. "Can you imagine people who claim to be special because they understand what compassion truly is, turning around and treating an innocent person like a piece of crap? These Nashramh darlings found, by perverse and illegal means, that one of their sisters, whom they'd persecuted for centuries, was absolutely and completely innocent of all charges made against her. What did they do then? They put her into a female body that looked like a hairy little primate and stuck her in suicidal situations with the hope she'd be lost forever out in the void. Even when she did her best to be one of them, these creatures treated her as a pariah . . . a piece of filth no one wanted to see or touch. And this beautiful, sensual, and young-looking Magum across from me doesn't want to talk about the dirty little problem because it's distasteful. I wonder if you or your bloody sisterhood has learned anything at all. It sounds to me like you're all making excuses for your ineptitude and callous actions, rather than admitting where the real fault lies."

"You have it all wrong, Arden! It has nothing to do with being distasteful or anything like that. It goes much deeper and I'm not sure I understand exactly why we've done some of the stupid things in the past that we'd prefer not to divulge to outsiders."

Glaring at Arden, she continued. "Haven't you ever done anything in the past that you've regretted with all your mind and soul? Do you like to have your scruffy snout rubbed in it over and over again? Yes, we've made mistakes and no, you're wrong. We

have learned from them. We can't undo what we did in the past, so why do you bring it up now?"

"No I haven't, my dear. I'm afraid that your little secret is out of the bag. So, why not make a clean bill of it and answer the question."

Claren sat poised like a stone statue, not moving a single muscle for a space of time that seemed like an eternity to Telly. Then, taking a deep breath, she made up her mind and turned to Arden.

"It's true, Arden, that we treated Sahlie Lor like a pariah after she was cleared of all charges. It is also true that we employed immoral and illegal means with which to discover she was innocent, although at the time we were trying to prove her guilt."

Shaking her head, Claren smiled to herself. "Can you imagine this, children?" she addressed Telly and Neferah. "I . . . we, all of us from Council Central's Primary Intelligence Section on down through our ranks, devoted nearly a quarter of a million years to discover infiltrators in our midst . . . and all we came up with was a Tzian peasant who'd fallen into our midst because she'd been kind to one of our injured sisters? We found out that not only was Sahlie Lor innocent, but that the black Jerden, who was a gamma-O, couldn't mix into one of our corporeal bodies. He had, in fact, attached himself to one of our outlying computer systems and worked his mischief from there. Unfortunately, at the time, we didn't know that. We expected the worst and took what we considered correct measures to counter this intrusion. As time passed and nothing but circumstantial results dragged the process out, we lost sight of what was happening, and Sahlie Lor became a victim of our ungainly system. We formed a habit of treating Sahlie as an alien infiltrator, and when we found she was otherwise, we continued to persecute her out of habit."

"Only out of habit," Arden prompted.

"No, not only out of habit, although habit was part of the problem we were faced with. After all, habit is a form of inertia and is difficult to change without a concerted effort. But then, we're all human with complex natures. Part of our problem stems from our own sense of pride. How in the Creator's name could we forgive this woman for being innocent when we'd spent nearly a quarter million years trying to prove her guilt? Our persecution of Sahlie

Lor became more than a habit . . . it now became an institution, how dare she be innocent!"

Clenching her fists, Claren's voice rose. "And even worse yet, she was like a mirror image reflecting our past sins. Every time her name was mentioned and everywhere she was seen became a constant reminder of what we'd done to her. She made us look shoddy and we didn't want to see that side of our natures paraded before us. Treating her as if she were still under suspicion somehow seemed to bury the truth of the matter. We were trying to push our own terrible feelings of guilt back on her shoulders because we didn't like what we saw in ourselves."

Glaring at Arden she nearly shouted. "Now do you see why we don't want to talk about this subject? We are the problem, not Sahlie Lor . . . or more correctly, Kruminah B'Tziah. We, who try to believe ourselves to be compassionate and just, have in fact, become monsters to one of our own. It wasn't planned that way, but we were sucked into the quagmire of suspicion and then cruelty. At times we thought Sahlie innocent, then some uncanny things happened, circumstantial but pointing in her direction, and then we knew she had to be the Jerden. No matter what way we went, we were damned to both doubt and suspicion of even the most innocent words and actions that this woman made. God, it was worse than quicksand . . . we were caught in a trap of fear and suspicion that could only turn to unreasoned cruelty."

"And everyone got caught up in it?" Arden asked.

"No, not everyone, Batdor Zell and her security people were dead set against it all along. They were unwilling participants in the affair, but had nothing to do with the decisions that were made. And then there was Rinim Poodor, who came into our sisterhood very much later. She was a strong voice in Council Central against this travesty, and was overruled by our then established tradition of persecuting the woman. Our thinking was so frozen in what had become a dogma, that we couldn't hear the voices of caution and reason. Have I answered your question adequately?"

"Not entirely. What is Kruminah's fate now? Is she still an outsider or is she someone you just tolerate?"

"No. She's a lieutenant to Ruby, and a permanent member of Council Central. Remember, she was confined within Borgdragon Wall with Ruby for 110,000 years and was instrumental in

effecting the destruction of the citadel. She was also the one most responsible for saving the life of the elf-child we now call Miriam B'Meszhiah when she entered the wall's sanctuary. It was Kruminah who brought together Miriam's Magum personality. There is no doubt about whom or what Kruminah is now. But, we still have our past mistakes to rectify . . . not with her, but with ourselves."

"That's quite true," Arden agreed. "But how is it that she's a member of Council Central? I was under the impression that only Sisters-Magum held that position."

"Oh, that changed after Samael-Borgdragon and Belial's other two citadels were destroyed. All of our sisters who were incarcerated in those terrible black walls were joined together as one and became the true, core body of our Council Central. The very structure of our sisterhood has changed radically since then, and we are now truly far more compassionate and understanding of our human condition than ever before. Before our common experience in Borgdragon and the other walls, which brought us together in an ultimate common cause, we were no more than raw primitives playing at being compassionate. That is why we made the monumental mistake with Sahlie Lor and other equally serious mistakes with others. I don't think it could ever happen again, and I pray it never does."

"God," Neferah sighed. "I'm overwhelmed by your references to time and things that occurred a quarter, no, more like half a million years ago. You talk as if it was only a couple of weeks ago and everybody was still hanging around."

"But they are all still hanging around," Claren smiled. "I'm here, and this hairy creature is still here. Many of our oldest friends and associates were lost during the conflagration, but in time they too may be found. We're tied together in this temporal universe as sure as if we had threads holding us. Even when we shed these mortal bodies, we remain together, although in a more discrete way, but together nonetheless. Remember this, though, when you meet other human beings, both you and they are made of the same stuff. Your immortal souls once brought together, even for a fleeting moment, will always share the same futures as one corporate structure. No, don't press me on what I mean by corporate structure," she waved as Telly started to ask her a question. "That's something you'll learn about when you have more experience."

"Now's the time to call for a cessation of our conversation for today," Arden announced. "Frankly I'm dead tired and intend to go to bed, with or without your concurrence."

"Agreed," Claren laughed, rising to her feet and turning to leave. "I hope not to see you again during the remainder of this voyage, Arden, but no doubt you'll intrude on my privacy when it suits your doggy disposition to do so."

"You can count on that, my dear."

Without further comment, both Magums walked out of the room, leaving Telly and Neferah alone for the first time.

"Well my dear Kin, I guess we have a great deal to talk about," Neferah smiled. "I'm an old, old cat who has a lot of rethinking to do, and you can help me out."

Neferah held her hand out to Telly with a bright smile. "My name is Neferah B'Tziah and I'm damn glad to meet you. I do believe you're Telakin B'Mesziah and a bloody tough pathfinder at that. Shall we start this show over again, my friend? We did get off to a rather bad start, did we not?"

Telly took her hand, bowed and kissed it gently. "I rather thought it was a good start. But then, why quibble about a little matter of protocol. . . ."

Chapter 11

Moving

I knew all about Jennanine B'Mesziah, but had never come into close physical contact with her before . . . and this proved to be a real pleasure. On the other hand, far from Three-Stones Academy, the promise of close proximity on a protracted scale didn't sit well with some. . . .

11:30-14 TALUM 8304-7N5

After Jenn and Raphael were married, Jenn worried about what would happen next. She'd graduated from Masterbrook College only days before the wedding, and her greatest fear was that Raphael would be assigned to a different place and they'd be separated forever. She tried to figure out how she could get her sisters at the Nashramh Embassy to assign her to whatever G.C.C. naval facility or ship Raphael would serve on. It almost drove Jenn to distraction because he wasn't the least bit worried about the subject. Even Quorib wasn't worried when Jenn talked about various schemes to get a special transfer.

"Worry you not, Sister Jenn," she lisped in her funny little way. "Surely Raphael will not leave you. Oh no, never would he leave his wonderful little bride. Do have some more tea."

"Quorib, you just don't understand!" Jenn cried, "I don't want to lose him . . . even for a day. Oh, everything in this galaxy is so far apart and I know how navy wives have to be alone for so long waiting for their husbands. Oh God, I remember before when Neftal . . . no, not again."

"Worry you not, my sister. Worry you not."

It was easy for Quorib to say. She wasn't in love, so how could she understand? Jenn just couldn't see why Raphael wasn't worried about their possible separation, so she was stuck with doing all the worrying for both of them.

They'd only been settled in their new apartment for ten days, when the light blue envelope arrived by special messenger from the Nashramh Embassy. It was addressed to Jenn.

Jenn sat down on the carpet by the entrance door after the woman left, staring at the envelope. She was absolutely terrified of what she'd find inside. Maybe it would be a promotion or an announcement of some kind. Would they send it by special messenger if it was? Then again, maybe it was an invitation to a party. Jenn loved parties. The envelope was a light blue, after all, and official business wasn't done in colored envelopes as far as she could remember. Being an elf, and curious as a Tzian cat, she couldn't resist just a little peek no matter how nervous she was.

Oh, she knew. It was probably belated congratulations on their wedding. That was it. Suppose it wasn't, though. Jenn held the envelope up to the light and tried to see through the opaque paper, but couldn't discern anything. "Darn!" Anything was better than sitting there wondering what was hidden inside. She really wanted to know, but then she didn't. Oh how she hated decisions, especially when she was the one who had to make them. Maybe she should wait until Raphael got home; he'd know just what to do.

Jenn sat and stared at the envelope for awhile and finally her curiosity overpowered her. Again, being an elf, and curious, she couldn't restrain herself.

Using her fingernail, Jenn cut neatly along the end of the thin paper envelope until it was open. Then, peeking inside, she tried to get a hint of what the message might be, but the opaque sheet was folded the wrong way. "Oh, why did they have to fold it over like that?" she muttered to herself. "Now, what am I going to do?"

Curiosity finally got the best of her after a few minutes of indecision and trying to peek around the fold. Jenn pulled the single sheet out and opened it. The message had only three lines:

Sister Jennanine B'Mesziah #15446462A2A, report to Three-Stones Academy on or before 05 MAREN 8305-7N5.

Jenn's stomach churned and all sorts of fleeting fears invaded her mind. "What's the point of where should I put these stupid books? I'll just have to pack them when I move anyway." Wringing her hands, pacing the floor, and rearranging the same little stack of books over and over again, she talked to the otherwise empty room.

"Oh, my gracious, what am I going to do? This is terrible! We just got married and now they want to send me off across the galaxy to some strange place, for what, to go to school again? This is all wrong, I can't leave Raphael. Oh, what am I going to do?"

Rearranging the books again, Jenn began wringing her hands. "Oh, why doesn't Raphael get home? I can't stand this waiting. He's just got to figure something out. Maybe I should call Quorib. No I can't. I forgot, she won't be home now." She was still pondering what to do when she heard Raphael's key click in the lock.

When Raphael arrived home early, Jenn nearly smothered him with kisses and hugged him desperately, then, she pushed the moist and crumpled sheet of blue paper into his hand. "Honey, there's got to be some sort of mistake! We just got married and now they're sending me away. I don't want to leave you, Raphael. You just have to do something!"

"Why don't I go with you?" Raphael smiled as he hugged her close. Amused, he guessed that she'd been fretting over this.

"Come with me? How can you do that? You're . . . you're in the G.C.C. Navy and they won't let you go."

"Hey, I'm not in the navy any longer, Jenn. My resignation has been accepted and my discharge arrived today. We're both going to Three-Stones Academy." He tweaked her nose. "Now isn't that better?"

"But, I don't understand. How can you go with me when you aren't even in my sisterhood? Do you know someone with a lot of influence?"

Evidently Jenn, in her excitement, had forgotten what he'd told her about himself and the Nashramh. Either that or she'd heard his words, but never actually understood them. With her, he never really knew. At times she appeared to know exactly what was being said, while other times she tuned out anything she didn't want to hear. This was especially true when the subject was disagreeable

or upsetting. Otherwise, Jenn was literally a genius with complex ideas and technical data. Boy, what a funny little elf she was.

"First, Jenn," Raphael smiled, holding her out at arm's length, "I'm in the Nashramh. I thought you understood that. And, I do know the most influential people in our sisterhood . . . in fact you might say I have a little bit of influence myself . . . not much, but some."

"You are? But you're a man," Jenn stood wide-eyed. "I think I missed out on something. Do . . . do you mean I've been fretting about all of this for nothing?"

"I'm afraid so, my dear."

Jenn was so overwhelmed by this revelation that she showered him with all sorts of questions about her new assignment, hardly pausing to allow him to answer.

"What kind of academy are we going to? Is the food any good? Do they serve a lot of veggies and nuts . . . what kind of fruit do they have? What's the weather like? I hope there aren't too many extremes, and where will we live? Do you think we can get a cute apartment, Raphael?"

"Yes. No, and yes."

"No? No to what?"

"Hey, slow down Jenn. I used to teach there a long time ago, and it is a beautiful, friendly place. You will definitely love it, believe me."

"When did you teach there?" Jenn pressed.

"A long time ago, honey. Now I'll tell you all about it while we prepare to leave."

"We're leaving now?"

"Yes, right away. Quorib will accompany us to the spaceport and see us off."

"Oh, I'm going to miss my friend Quorib." Jenn stopped short, tears beginning to form at the corners of her eyes. "I'm going to miss her terribly." Things were happening too fast for her to take this all in.

As they packed their belongings, Raphael told Jenn about various aspects of Three-Stones Academy and about one of his close friends there, Rinim Poodor.

"You'll like her, Jenn. Rinim always starts off a new friendship with one of her favorite drinks."

"What kind of drink?"

"It's something very different and special," he laughed, "and it's called 'Jenny's Treat'."

"Who's Jenny?"

"Someone who lived long ago, now let's get busy, Quorib will be here in a little while."

The voyage to Three-Stones Academy took 14 months and Jenn enjoyed every moment of it. She had Raphael all to her self and the two were never separated during the entire trip. They were the only passengers traveling aboard the Nashramh Class I scout freighter, 'SF Maeling Hosha-Fae'. This was a small craft, compared to G.C.C. vessels, measuring less than five kilometers in overall length. She was actually a well-armed warship that didn't engage in commercial trade nor carry regular passengers, so the two newlyweds weren't obliged to entertain anyone. They were free to remain alone in their cabin or meet with the crew in the wardroom if they so wished. Raphael spent a great deal of time working on special problems with the ship's computer while Jenn practiced her code sequences and restudied both her textbooks and sample data from the vessel's CIC access terminal. Aside from all of their professional endeavors, the two made love all the time, which was just great as far as Jenn was concerned. The way things were going, she didn't really care if they ever arrived at their destination, since living on this ship was just smashing. Jenn was already two months pregnant when they finally arrived at Three-Stones Academy, and this was by no means an accident.

The Maeling Hosha's rapid approach to the single world orbiting a small blue sun happened within minutes of the ship's temporal entry warning alarm. Jenn suddenly found herself being ushered into a lifeboat-fighter without even getting to see the planet's surface from up in space.

"Hey! What's going on here, Raphael? Are we in some sort of danger? Are we going to be separated again?"

"Take it easy, honey. This is how things are normally done here. This is the primary headquarters of our Sisterhood's Council Central, and the fewer people who know where it is or what the planet looks like from space, the better."

"Are you sure about this, Raphael?"

"Yes, Jenn, this isn't something I'd joke about. Now just relax and enjoy the ride."

"Well, I guess you're right. This is just a normal procedure and . . . there's really nothing to worry about?"

"No, there's nothing to worry about."

"Then, I guess I won't worry." Jenn conceded, still not convinced.

The lifeboat-fighter landed smoothly after a long descent to the planet's surface. Jenn was expecting to find an armed camp with thousands of warships ready to strike out against an enemy attack and hordes of security people checking each and every movement they made. She was disappointed to find neither. The craft moored next to an extending walkway leading down into a brightly lit passenger terminal, where only two security guards were stationed. The guards nodded to Raphael and informed him that his luggage would be sent on to his apartment and a car was waiting for him outside. Other than that, they only smiled at Jenn as she passed.

"Hey, Raphael, where are all the security precautions? I thought this was Council Central's headquarters," she whispered as she poked him in the ribs.

"All around us," he grinned.

"Where?"

"Well hidden, my dear. Well hidden."

"Oh."

The ground car, driven by a grey-uniformed security guard, sped off through the night towards a glimmering complex of low buildings bordering a large body of dark water. Jenn had trouble seeing the stars overhead, although it was pitch black outside. A faint glow far above them obscured all but the brightest stars.

"There's a natural magnetic flux in the ozone which causes that effect," Raphael noted, almost as if reading her thoughts. "It has something to do with both our argon-rich atmosphere and our blue sun. The result is beneficial to life on the surface since ultraviolet, x-rays, and other wavelengths, are either diverted or filtered out."

"Is there a moon?"

"No."

"I think I'll miss having a moon at night. It's nice to stare out of the window and think secret thoughts in the light of the moon."

"I know what you mean, Jenn. But then there are other things about this world you'll grow to love just as much."

"I still think I'll miss having a moon out at night. How are we going to take nice romantic moonlit walks without a moon? Just think, love songs without a moon in them. Yes, I'm going to miss having a moon."

Raphael looked over at Jenn and shook his head. She was always worried over things nobody could do anything about. Elves really hated change, and Jenn was no exception.

Opening the car's door, the security guard handed Raphael a silver key, then helped Jenn out of the vehicle.

"It's the second unit back, my Grace," the woman spoke softly and then turned back to her ground car and left.

"Thank you," Raphael replied and then took Jenn by the hand. "Well, we're finally here, and I'm sure you'll love our new home and everything about this beautiful world."

"What did she mean by 'my Grace'?"

"Oh, nothing particular", he nodded "just a formality."

"There's something strange going on, Raphael. First of all, I didn't even know you were a member of our sisterhood until just before we left Masterbrook College. Then we just walk through customs at the spaceport without even being checked. Now a security guard calls you 'my Grace'. There's something here I should know. What is it?"

"Let's talk about it later, honey, when we're rested."

"No!" Jenn dug her heels in. "I'm not moving until you tell me what's going on."

"I'll bet you'll move if I tickle you."

"No I won't!"

"Well, okay. I'm a Magum and get all sorts of special treatment. Now let's go and see what our new home looks like."

"There it is again, that word Magum," she thought to herself as she pursed her lips to reply. It just didn't make sense. How could anyone be a bunch of different people in one body anyway? Who'd be in control of a person's body? She knew it had to be something to do with rank. Everybody would want to walk in a different direction, or all talk at once . . . and Raphael didn't fit that mold. No, it didn't make any sense, not like mathematics or linguistics.

Tickling her ribs and ushering Jenn up the path, Raphael made for the apartment doors. Turning the silver key in a gilded lock, he opened the large double doors and the two walked through. The apartment's lights turned on automatically as they stepped across

the threshold, and they were greeted with a display of lovely flowers and a tall crystal flask of deep red liquor on a serving table in the foyer.

Jenn stopped short. "What do you mean, a Magum?"

"A Magum."

She wasn't going to let him off the hook this time. She wanted to know what a Magum really was once and for all.

"But . . ."

"Well! My dear Raphael," the stout woman with glowing green eyes demanded as she approached the apartment doors from outside, "where are you hiding your young bride?"

Raphael turned, laughed and hugged the funny-looking woman. Jenn stood back, politely smiling, and wondered what was going on.

"Rinim, It's great to see you again!" he exclaimed. "Jenn, this is Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor, my closest friend and one of my oldest ones."

Jenn smiled shyly and responded with a little bow. "I am honored to meet you, my Grace. Raphael has told me all about you and all of the things you've done for him and everybody else."

"Don't believe a word of it," Rinim gurgled. "The only true thing he says is my favorite libation is second to none."

Rinim produced three glasses and a flat bottle from under her robe. "That crystal flask is a wedding gift to you two, so we won't open it now. This little bottle will serve the purpose for the moment."

Raphael took the glasses and bottle from her. Then, setting the glasses on the foyer table, he poured the red liquid into each, handing one to Rinim and Jenn.

"This is called Jenny's Treat," Rinim gurgled. "It is native to my home world of Poodor and comes in two forms, this, which isn't intoxicating, and Chryssenam which is. They both do the same thing to your tongue, though, and taste about the same. It's a great drink to begin a new friendship with, and will do all sorts of wondrous things to your taste buds."

"That it will," Raphael laughed.

"Well, peace be with all of us, and may our lives be blessed with the presence and joy of your new child to be, Jenn. Peace," Rinim gurgled as the three tapped their glasses together and then sipped the deep red libation.

"Wow!" Jenn exclaimed, "This really perks my taste buds up!"

"I hope you agree this is a good way to start a new and long friendship, my young sister."

"Oh, yes it is!" Jenn giggled.

"Shall we continue our conversation while we investigate our new home?" Raphael suggested, taking Jenn by the hand.

"Come on, Rinim, this is going to be fun," Jenn giggled, then stopped dead in her tracks. "Hey, how do you know I'm going to have a baby, Rinim?"

"Now, now, I'm sure Raphael must have told you that we old Magums have some unusual ways of communicating, hey?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Well, we do. Now let's look around to see what we have in this great new apartment of yours, okay?"

Jenn was overwhelmed by both the size and luxury of the beautiful apartment. It had its own walled garden with a private swimming pool set in the middle. In addition to the living room, two bedrooms, bath, and kitchen, there was a great library with two desks in it. One of the desks had specialized communications and cryptographic equipment built into it so that Jenn could study and work at home. The other desk was designed for Raphael's needs. This entire affair was beyond her wildest dreams and nearly left her in a state of shock. Rinim, too, was better than she'd envisioned, and she fell in love with her funny ways right away.

She noticed that since their bedroom was so large, she could put up a small wall-break in one corner and turn it into a nursery. The second bedroom would be for guests.

"Oh, this is going to be such neat fun, isn't it Raphael? Our own home with a new little baby, isn't that great?"

"You haven't seen anything yet, Jenn," Rinim gurgled. "There are all sorts of wonderful things for children to do here at Three-Stones Academy. Your little one will have all sorts of friends and fun things to do."

* * *

Admiral Cecil Drubb stepped aboard the SD Yanna Jun-Lal with an escort of ten special security guards, carrying a heavy gold-laced cocoon. Neferah met them at the airlock and escorted the party to the ship's brig where their sedated prisoner, Meseosargon, lay encased in plasti-cast and a gold sheathing. He'd

been kept alive for the past 16 months with intravenous injections of specially formulated nutritional compounds laced with Claxo-Kam 10. The Belial was guarded at all times by one of the three Magums aboard and Council Central knew everything that happened with respect to his condition. No precautions were being ignored and Admiral Drubb's orders were obeyed to the letter. The ship's deadman mechanism was activated when she left the ship before the raid, and was manned continuously by relays of both the vessel's security and operating personnel.

By now it was certain that the black ones were in hot pursuit. The Legions of Light would do anything to get their god back and they were definitely using everything available to them to discover where the Yanna Jun was heading. Neferah and LiCu used every means of deception and evasive action they knew to ensure their ship wasn't being traced. Of course, the 'deadman' mechanism was engaged at all times. If necessary, they would detonate the vessel to avoid the Belial's recovery.

The Yanna Jun had taken a zigzag course lasting just over 16 months to reach the well-hidden Rim Area Defense Station, making regular course corrections to throw off sub-binary tracking devices. It was learned long ago, from the captured enemy warships, that they could track G.C.C. vessels by their drive signatures in at least three levels below temporal space. The fact that the Nashramh's Robel III sub-binary drives were different from both those of the G.C.C. and the black ones, made absolutely no difference to the sisterhood's planners. Every precaution and deception was used to ensure their destination wasn't traced by any means.

"Welcome to our nest, Admiral," Arden grinned. "Our exalted little guest is breathlessly awaiting his new traveling gear."

"I'm sure he'll love it," she replied. "Now let's have a look at him."

Sister Mouldan nodded to the Admiral and opened the brig's vault-like maximum security cell. Claren and LiCu were inside with the prisoner and each nodded as Cecil entered.

"He's all yours," LiCu spoke out, "although I will accompany you to the stage one receiving station."

"Agreed."

"I don't trust this sheathing he's in," LiCu continued, "so let's get him inside the cocoon right away."

"Bring in the transit unit and put him in it now," Cecil directed her security guards.

"Between you and me, I'm glad to be rid of it. The creature's belongs to you now." Neferah was relieved to be out of a position she detested. Running away wasn't her style. She was a true warrior who was set on entrapping and attacking her enemies, and anything else ground at her nerves.

Four of the women pulled the bulky gold-impregnated unit in the cell and immediately opened one end. All of the intravenous tubes were removed from Meseosargon's arm, which was exposed at one small point. They lifted him carefully and slid him into the cocoon and immediately sealed the end.

"There's enough air inside the transit unit to sustain him until we arrive at his new home," Cecil noted.

"Well, good riddance," Claren laughed. She too was glad to be rid of the Belial.

"Now, I have two other items to take care of before we leave this ship. Captain, you may disengage the 'deadman' mechanism after we exit the airlock. Also, I have new orders for you and the G.C.C. pathfinder team which you will open after I leave."

"Agreed," Neferah nodded as she accepted two sealed brown envelopes with red letters stamped on them.

"Now, let's get this creature out of here," Cecil ordered, and the four security guards lifted the Belial's heavy gold-laced cocoon and removed it from the cell. Outside, they were joined by the other six guards. All made for the ship's airlock leaving Ardel and Claren behind.

"How have you been getting along with your pathfinders and other guests, Captain?" Cecil asked just before leaving the airlock.

"Quite well, Admiral. Granted, things didn't start off too well, but then everything smoothed out. Most of the problem was the result of misconceptions, but they were ironed out and everyone has benefited . . . even that dog."

"That's good, because you'll have them aboard for a while longer. The details are covered in your new orders. You and your people did a damned good job with that planetside maneuver and grand exit, Neferah. At least this time your ship held together. I never doubted you'd pull it off, and I'm damned glad to call you my sister."

The two shook hands and saluted. Then, Cecil turned and accompanied her security guards, who'd completed strapping the heavy cocoon to an anti-grav plate, and left the Yanna Jun.

Neferah stood watching the heavysset woman walking along the transit tube and decided she was, in fact, a real friend.

"I take it you have special orders, Mouldan," she purred to her security chief. "You always seem to be one jump ahead of me in that matter. Special friends, I suppose."

"Only a different organization, Captain, you needn't worry about friends though. You're well-thought of by both our fleet admiralty and Council Central. You're a tough old cat, and a popular one at that."

"Oh, my God, a genuine complement from 'Mouldan the Silent', I can't believe it! What has this navy come to?" Neferah shrugged as she left for the ship's bridge.

Only the sergeant-at-arms saw the rare smile cross Mouldan's otherwise expressionless face. Una Mayer decided there was a hell of a lot more to these strange and silent security sisters than she'd ever been aware of. They were actually human.

Neferah opened her sealed orders after she was alone in her cabin. The order was short and to the point. Her vessel was to undergo a complete overhaul before being committed to further action. This came as no surprise, since the Yanna Jun took a terrible beating during the raid and was fortunate to have held together as long as she had. Anyway, Neferah could look into what new equipment was available for installation during the overhaul.

"What the hell do you mean, boss?" Dove yelled. "We're going to be stuck on this damned RAD station for the next 150 years? I don't believe it!"

"Did I hear you right, rest and recuperation for 150 years," Dyson demanded, his jaw set hard.

"That's what the paper says," Telly spoke softly. "These are orders from our G.C.C.'s Grand Admiralty and signed by Senior-Admiral Trem Bell-Boulout and endorsed by the Nashramh's Council Central and signed by Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor."

"I'll be dipped in Sargon's shit before I rot here in, what you call rest and recuperation for 150 years," Dove spat out.

"That goes for me too," Dyson and the others chimed in.

"Do I hear the voices of dissension?" Telly asked. "These are our orders and we will obey all lawful orders. Do I make myself clear, people?"

"Count me out, you lousy son-of-a-bitch!" Dove exploded. "I'm a combat soldier, not a pretty little harem wench. I want a bloody damned transfer!"

"No transfers allowed."

"There are other ways of forcing a transfer," Dove mumbled under her breath. The others, with the exception of Moskall Rakon, nodded with approval.

"I didn't hear that," Telly spoke softly, his words precise and clear. "If anyone were to advocate, or even hint at mutiny, I will see him or her in hell first." Things were starting to get out of hand. Now was the time to lay down the law before they got completely out of control. He was going to put a lid on this problem here and now.

"You can't stay awake all the time, little boy," Dove hissed, her eyes set hard and menacing.

Telly surveyed the hostile faces of his combat team, then, made a decision. "Those of you, who choose to disregard this order and want to force the issue, stay in place. Those of you, who are loyal to the Pathfinders Corps, move to the starboard side of the room."

"Don't give us that. . . ." Dove began.

"Arrest that soldier and disarm her, Rakon." Telly cut in.

Captain Rakon pulled a laser pistol from under her tunic and leveled at Dove's stomach. "Into my cabin soldier, and if you try anything stupid I'll kill you. Now move!"

Dove glared at the weapon and obeyed without resisting.

"Now, those of you who are loyal, move to the starboard side of the room."

Everyone got up and walked to the opposite wall, only Dyson hesitated before moving.

"Do I take it that you're only appearing to be loyal to us, Dyson?"

"No sir. I don't like the damned order, but it's a legal one and I'm loyal to the corps, no matter how much I dislike the order. And . . ." he paused, "Dove was just mouthing off. She's loyal to her very core."

Telly ignored his last statement.

"Now everyone, you will repair to the ship's main gymnasium and form into parade order for inspection. Sergeant Izel, you're in command. I'll join you shortly."

"Yes sir. All right, you people, on the double!"

Telly paused for a moment to collect his thoughts, and then went to Captain Rakon's cabin. Play time was over and there was no room left for compromise.

Commander Mouldan closed the heavy hatch of the maximum security cell behind the female pathfinder and wondered what the hell it was all about. Lieutenant B'Meszhiah and Captain Rakon had escorted the woman, Corporal Dove Konissah, to the ship's brig with a laser pistol pointed at her back. When the woman tried to address the lieutenant, he ignored her and the captain told her to keep quiet. Mouldan chose not to notice the officer's pocket pistol, suspecting the lieutenant was armed with one too. It was better to wait and see what was up before making a judgment.

"Only Captain Rakon and I are authorized to meet with the prisoner, Commander, and she's to remain in isolation without outside exercise. You will consider her both hostile and dangerous. Do you have any questions?"

"I understand, Lieutenant," Mouldan nodded.

The pathfinder officers left without speaking further.

"These are the charges being brought against you, Corporal Konissah. You're to read them thoroughly and sign each sheet to affirm you understand each item clearly. If you have any questions pertaining to a specific item, I'll fill you in. Otherwise, you will not discuss any other matters with me. Do I make myself clear?"

Taking the thin sheaf of papers, Dove nodded her head. "Yes you do, Captain."

She read each page carefully and signed each as she completed it. Then without comment, she handed it back to Rakon.

"You are to be removed to the RAD station's central security lockup where you'll await any judgments from G.C.C. Admiralty Headquarters. Until otherwise notified, you're to be kept in isolation. That is all, Corporal."

Captain Rakon stood up and turned to leave.

"Will I be able to see Lieutenant B'Meszhiah again, Captain?"

"No comment."

"I understand."

Rakon left the security cell and made for the officer's club to have a stiff drink. This whole damned affair disgusted her. If she'd been in B'Meszhiah's boots, she'd have shot Dove out of hand and pressed charges later, but the lieutenant was too damned proper for that. If nothing else, he was too lenient with the woman. It was beyond belief that a seasoned pathfinder, of all people, would actually disobey a legal order no matter how much he or she objected to it. Threatening an officer was bad enough, but to advocate disobedience to a legal order . . . never.

Telly was careful in his wording of the charges against Dove Konissah, knowing full well that Captain Rakon preferred to have her shot if possible. Dove was a brave and loyal trooper, who'd made a stupid mistake, but unfortunately it was made in front of other people and another officer. That was a definite problem. If this confrontation had been between the two of them without witnesses, then something could have been salvaged. Unfortunately he'd been put on the spot and Dove had seen to that. Dove put him there so now she'd pay the consequences. There would be no way to command either the respect or cooperation of his troops if he let her, or anyone, get away with open insubordination. She'd nearly succeeded in inciting other pathfinders to mutiny, whether she actually intended to or not. No, she would have to be dealt with. The Pathfinder's code of conduct was explicit on this kind of thing and she had pushed the issue beyond reason. Unfortunately he'd never worked with these people before and couldn't anticipate their moods.

Telly was stuck and had to press charges whether he wanted to or not. And, he didn't want to press them. He'd emphasized her superior conduct during the raid and recommended a transfer to another unit, although he knew this was impossible. They were being isolated at the RAD Station to ensure that knowledge about Meseosargon's whereabouts wasn't leaked out. He hadn't spelled it out to his pathfinder team, but logic should have told them that, because of the kind of mission they'd just finished, they required special precautions. Keeping a low profile was as much a protection for his team as keeping the Belial hidden from his rescuers. The black ones would like nothing better than to identify just who'd been in on the raid and to capture them alive. Then hell would have to be paid. Now he had G.C.C. Admiralty's answer and

it placed complete responsibility for Dove's disposition in his hands, God what a mess.

Rereading the document before entering Dove's cell, Telly was still doubtful about how he'd handle the matter. He was given the choice of a summary court-martial, with either prison or execution being authorized, or of a summary discharge from the service. The G.C.C. Admiralty was normally firm on cases of this kind and inclined to set examples, so the options being offered were a good sign. This last option, a discharge, wouldn't let Dove leave the RAD station, but then, she wouldn't be exactly a prisoner anymore and could live a regular civilian life here. He reread the orders carefully and noted their precise wording allowed him complete latitude of action. He could actually choose to do anything or nothing depending on how he assessed the situation. Now that was interesting. Closing the document and folding it, he signaled to the security guard who opened the cell door for him. He hadn't made a final determination about Dove. He'd wait and see how she responded now that she'd had time to cool down.

Dove came to attention, hardly conscious that she was still nude in front of her commanding officer.

"At ease, Corporal," Telly spoke softly. "I've received instructions from G.C.C. Admiralty Headquarters at Albo Andorsut IV, authorizing me to hold you up for summary court-martial for the charges brought against you."

"I understand, Lieutenant."

"I've considered the matter, Corporal, and because of the seriousness of the situation, I cannot ignore either your threats or insubordination. You've been a loyal and brave trooper, and I don't doubt your loyalty to our corps. On the other hand, there is no room for personal vendettas in our team and if I can't trust my troopers, then I won't have them in my command."

Stopping for a moment to consider his words, Telly observed the silent woman standing rigidly in front of him. He'd never really noticed before, but she was very attractive and without her clothes on, didn't look like an experienced soldier.

"Because of your service to our corps, I've decided to forgo any kind of court-martial and to initiate your immediate discharge from the G.C.C. Pathfinders Corps. This discretion is allowed in the terms and conditions outlined in my general orders concerning

your case. I'll see to it that the paperwork is expedited so you can be released from this cell as soon as possible."

"Lieutenant B'Meszhiah," Dove spoke weakly, tears beginning to form at the corners of her eyes. "Please don't do this to me. Have me court-martialed and shot, but please don't exile me from the corps!"

"Do you want to make a case of it then?"

"No, sir, you don't understand. I . . . I don't have anything else but the pathfinders. There isn't anything else. Everything I know and love is here with my shipmates there's just . . ." she stopped, pursing her lips. "Damn it, Lieutenant, I have a big mouth, but I swear I have no hard feelings towards you or anybody else . . . you . . . you and the others are all I've got in this whole galaxy. You're doing worse to me by discharging me than if you have me shot. At least I'd be shot as a fellow pathfinder who screwed up."

She composed herself, trying to ignore the tears. "I was out of line and wrong. I know it now. I guess it was the idea of being cooped up with nothing to do for 150 years. I've had time to think about it and I realize we have to be out of sight because of security. Those bastards won't rest until they find their little god . . . I didn't have any right to question that. I can't live without my . . ." her voice trailed off.

Telly stood looking at the desperate woman for nearly five minutes without answering. He hadn't given the order to have her discharged, but had only suggested it to her. He could still have her tried for insubordination and put in the brig for a little while. Oddly, he believed she actually didn't hold any grudges. Dove was too tough and brave to belittle herself with crawling for anyone, even as a deception. No, she was really telling the truth, and she was every bit a pathfinder, even if it meant facing a firing squad. He found this to be the toughest decision he'd ever made, and whatever the outcome, he alone would be responsible. Looking at this desperate woman standing there waiting for the axe to fall upset him and, right or wrong, he knew what he had to do.

"Private Konissah, you will report to your unit immediately upon release from this facility. You will not, I repeat, you will not relate anything that has transpired between you and I to anyone and you will conduct yourself as an exemplary pathfinder. Do I make myself clear, Private?"

"Yes . . . yes, sir," she whispered, her voice failing.

Telly turned on his heel and left without looking back.

* * *

Mirisca Rinim B'Meszhiah was born ten months after Raphael and Jenn arrived at Three-Stones Academy. She favored Jenn in appearance more than Raphael and her skin had less yellow than her mother's, being a light tan with a tinge of green. Otherwise, she looked something like a mix between a Low and Middle Elf. She'd been named after Miriam which meant knowledge of bitter water, and Isca, meaning beautiful to be looked upon. The name was an invention of her mother's. Raphael liked it for a number of obvious reasons and enjoyed humming his beautiful little girl's name to himself. He never tired of picking up little Mirisca and cuddling her. Her delicate features fascinated him and her dark blue eyes shone with a deep and gentle intelligence.

"Come and see your father, little one," Raphael spoke softly to the drowsy little girl, "it's time to change your diapers and wash you up a bit."

He laid the infant on her back and performed all the necessary tasks while humming to her. Then, after making sure her diapers were adjusted, Raphael carried the gurgling little bundle into the kitchen where he'd prepared her formula in a warming package. "Now it's time to fill up those empty spots in your tummy and top the morning off with some happy songs. What do you think of that?"

"Good morning my children, never worry, never fear, old aunt Rinim will always be here." Rinim sang out her morning overture as she entered the brightly lit kitchen. Mirisca's bubbly smile greeted her favorite aunt, for even as an infant, she recognized this funny-looking woman as very special. Both Rinim and Raphael knew that Jenn's newborn infant was a binary-three who'd served in their sisterhood for many generations. Only Rinim knew the details concerning this lovely personality, and made no secret to Raphael that she was truly special.

The fact that the baby was a binary-three personality and much more than she appeared was mentioned to Jenn, who, immediately asked, "Is she a Magum?" When she was told Mirisca wasn't a Magum by any means, the issue was dropped. Jenn didn't really know just what a binary-three was, but she understood that her lovely baby was very special and a truly good human being. Jenn

felt a deep attachment for Mirisca and that alone was enough for her. She didn't think further about the matter since she could only see her delicate little Mirisca as a baby and nothing else. Mirisca too, felt Jenn's love and affection for her, and responded with every fiber of her being.

Rinim took over as if she were the child's grandmother, pampering and spoiling the lovely little girl. Nothing was too good for Jenn's and Raphael's baby, and Rinim knew all the tricks for spoiling children.

Although Jenn never understood all the deep philosophical monologues Rinim dove into, she never tired of her company. One day while Rinim was helping Jenn with Mirisca, Jenn overheard her whispering softly to the child, or possibly to herself.

"Oh, how I wish I had a little girl like you. If only I had a beautiful little baby, a wonderful little bundle. I'd have enjoyed the experience so. But then, I have you to pamper and play with, spoil and whatever. I couldn't really ask for anything more my sweet little Miri."

Right then Jenn decided to take action.

"Rinim, would you come over tomorrow morning? I need help giving Miri her bath."

"Oh, I don't know how to give baths, Jenn! I only know how to spoil little babies!"

"Well, we'll just have to change that, won't we, humm?"

"I think I'd be all thumbs! What if I get soap in Miri's eyes? Or I might break her? After all, Jenn, she is so small. I've never held little elfin babies before, what if I hurt her or something?"

"Oh nonsense, Rinim, you aren't going to break anything. Yes she's small compared to other races, but she won't break. I know because I pick her up all the time, and besides, I need your help. Please?"

"Well, if you insist. I don't want to make things difficult for you."

"Great! Miri will love having you bathe her! I'll show you everything you need to know, okay?"

"I don't want to disappoint anyone," Rinim spoke as if she were ready to start now, "certainly not dear Raphael's lovely little bride or our precious package."

During the following month, Jenn found all sorts of ways to snare Rinim into learning how to take care of a baby. She wanted to give the old Magum the best experience she could. Before long

Rinim was an expert at changing diapers, feeding and bathing as any other new aunt. It was important to Jenn that Rinim had fond and loving memories of these times. As old as Rinim was, she hadn't experienced everything, not even having a child of her own. Jenn soon found that her new friend was quite human and not some sort of super sister who knew all that there was to know. In fact, Rinim was totally unpretentious and loved being with other people.

The following year was almost like a dream for Jenn, since everything was so wonderful. She had Raphael, Mirisca, Rinim, and all sorts of friends around her all the time. Even her work on cryptographic models was challenging and gave her personal satisfaction. Everything was going right, and Jenn loved every moment of it.

Chapter 12

Binary-E

The gold thread that binds two souls together is special to our order . . . for it is a state somewhere between individual exile and a true binary marriage. To the uninitiated, it can be a confusing and frightening prospect. . . .

12:20-10 ARKEM 8307-7N5

It was late afternoon when Jenn and Raphael arrived at the stone building that housed Council Central. Jenn wondered why it was so small, especially since it was the main nerve center of the entire sisterhood. She thought about asking Raphael about this as they entered the anteroom where two grey-uniformed security women were sitting behind a large desk.

"Good afternoon Raphael," one of them smiled. "I believe this is your wife, Sister Jennanine?"

He nodded and grinned. "Yes she is."

"Will you both pass through the left-hand door and proceed to room number five?"

"Yes, thank you."

The two of them walked through the door without any kind of security check, which amazed Jenn.

"Aren't they going to check us and make sure we're who we say? I think there would be more security than that!"

Raphael couldn't keep from smiling. "There's more security here than any other place in this entire galaxy, Jenn, but you just can't see it."

As usual, Jenn had a memory slip and forgot her arrival at Three-Stones Academy and questioning him about the same visible lack of security. He'd assured her that it was all around them but just not obvious. She'd been so excited about arriving that evening that he could understand her forgetting.

They entered room number five which was furnished with two couches. Raphael motioned her to one. "You lie down here, sweetheart." Then he sat on the other couch and lay back, resting his head on a built-in pillow.

"What's going to happen to us, Raphael?" Jenn asked with a hint of tension in her voice. "There's nothing here, I can't see anything, or is it out of sight like security?"

"You guessed correctly, my dear." Raphael replied.

Jenn laid back, resting her head on a soft pillow-like protrusion at the head of the long couch. She looked up at the clear white ceiling and then everything went blank.

"So now we meet, Jennanine," a beautiful woman with lovely eyes spoke softly. "You have come a long way since joining our sisterhood."

"Yes, my Grace," Jenn whispered with a sense of awe. This was Ruby, the wonderful woman whom Raphael described to her, and she was far more beautiful than Jenn ever imagined. The tall woman, sitting behind a polished desk, was so calm and majestic that Jenn couldn't imagine her as being anyone else.

Jenn had talked to Raphael about Ruby and tried to envision what she must look like through his descriptions. In this respect, she failed to even come close since his version didn't do her justice. Actually, there was no way he could have done any better. Although Ruby looked like a real human being, Jenn could feel she was much more, but wasn't sure in what way. She knew Ruby was a powerful person, but she transcended beyond just being the corner-stone of the Sisterhood.

"Raphael told you how this arrangement works, yes?"

"Yes, my Grace."

"I must add this kind of binary arrangement is, by the terms of Nashramh law, only used for our 'Security Guardians', and you, Jennanine B'Meszhiah, are an exception to this rule. This exception is being made only because of Raphael's special status within our sisterhood. So mark you well that this is both an honor and a

solemn responsibility, for you will never again be out of the sight of this Council Central and will be special among us."

Ruby understood too well just how immature Jenn really was. She recalled those funny and innocent little Meszian elves that she'd befriended and lived with nearly 300,000 years ago. She had to choose her words carefully to impress Jenn with the implications and importance of making a decision such as she and Raphael had just undertaken.

"I understand from Raphael, that the two of you have discussed his status of being a Magum and for you to unite with him to form a binary-extended. You will be gaining much from this union and I hope you realize that along with the benefits there are also responsibilities you will learn of in time."

Jenn didn't have a chance to answer because Ruby's image faded and suddenly Raphael's handsome face appeared before her mind's eye. Jenn felt herself slowly beginning to move toward him and then actually merging with his features. This gave her a strange sensation which was much like being immersed in a fine latticework of tingling sparks, or was it sparkling liquid? Colors began to change and fold into one another, like so many small prisms in a thick swirling fluid. Then a powdery soft image of a beautiful girl came into focus before her.

"I am Anim B'Arel from the Arelim Breathline and I do hereby accept you, Jennanine B'Mesziah, as one with me."

Jenn was speechless as the lovely girl spoke of her past and how she'd become a part of Raphael's binary structure.

"I was an astrophysicist, Jenn. I wasn't a very strong person, physically or emotionally, so I buried myself in my work." Anim began to tell about her past life. However, her glowing eyes expressed more pain than did her words. She told about her long-dead friends and relatives, and how she'd been taken prisoner and transported to the terrible Samael-Borgdragon Estate to toil her life away and finally pressed into the very fabric of its black wall.

Jenn could actually feel the pain and anguish herself and see the torment in Anim's eyes as she described the events leading to her death. She wanted to offer some sort of comfort, but was unable to utter a word.

After a long space of time, Jenn passed into and became part of Anim, and as she progressed, the bloated-looking face of another woman materialized before her.

"Welcome sweet Jennanine," she smiled, "I'm Kaalou of the Cherubim, and I truly accept you as one with me."

Jenn tried to speak, but no words came.

"My home world is different from anything you've ever known, for it has vast flat continents, devoid of high mountains or deep valleys. There are grey motionless lakes and seas with both salty and fresh water in them. And, there are no moons orbiting above our thin atmosphere."

As she described her world, Jenn felt herself merging with Kaalou. She could actually see the surreal landscape as clearly as if she were there herself. It was as if she was seeing and feeling events through Kaalou's own body, rather than just listening to the words she was saying.

"From this beautiful windswept world did I come, and to our Nashramh was I a guardian of the sacred archive and a special courier. I, too, was imprisoned in Borgdragon Wall, Jenn." Kaalou continued telling about her former life and origins as well as how she came to be a binary with Raphael. She knew a great deal about Jenn and told her about many of her insights.

The next two faces to appear were of Salphine and Olimine of the Chajothim Proctorate. Both women were considered very lovely for their race and had a shallow, bony appearance with eyes which appeared to be like many-faceted sapphires that glowed with an inner light. Each was an accomplished musician and could play instruments from more than a thousand worlds. They also accepted Jenn as one with them and told her about their past lives and how they came to be binaries with Raphael.

ChiMon of the Chosalim appeared to Jenn as a potato with brown, knobby skin and small, faded brown eyes. "I too, accept you my dear Sister Jennanine B'Mesziah," she spoke softly. ChiMon very seldom spoke, and then only when it was absolutely necessary. When she did speak she was precise and left no relevant detail out. She too, told of her past origins and how she came to be with Raphael.

Then Telenji and Tengi of the Seraphim accepted her as one with them, each in her own soft-spoken terms. Their eyes were something like Salphine and Olimine's in their many-faceted appearance. Rather than an inner light glowing in them, they reflected a hundred tiny lights in all kinds of colors. Otherwise, the two seemed ghostlike in their soft transparent images. In temporal

form they were light in density and even less dense in their ethereal form.

"Both of us," Telenji laughed, "were so light in density that we had to wear special boots to keep us from floating off the ground on worlds with heavy atmospheres. Many who didn't know much about us thought we could fly, but of course that was out of the question. After all, we don't have wings, only arms and legs like everyone else. But then, we do swim through the thicker atmospheres just as you do through water. Come to think of it, water is the atmosphere for many life forms, isn't it?"

Telenji and Tengi both reminded Jenn of Chevolanoe, her good friend at Ling Wall, and of someone else she'd known from her distant past. His image appeared in her mind's eye. Oh yes, Hulican, Miriam and Neferah's friend. He too was from the Seraphim. She'd really liked him even though they'd only known each other for the short time she'd been assigned at the RAD station.

Jenn lay on the couch absorbing these different personalities as they merged together. She didn't understand what was happening, but felt their very presence within her. What they felt, she felt. What they saw, she saw.

After passing into and through the two Seraphim, Jenn came to the exotically beautiful cat-like face of Nestorah, the Leven-Adah fighter pilot from Tziah. Her soft voice and features were so much like Neferah, Jenn's best friend from long ago, that she gasped with amazement.

"So you recognize Neferah's features in my own, do you? It's no accident since we're of the same race on my home world of Tziah. Oh, yes my dear Jenn, I do accept you as one with myself."

Jenn definitely liked this Nestorah, whoever she was, because she was so much like Neferah. She remembered Neferah describing her home world of Tziah when they were children and now she could actually see that world in all its beautiful dimensions through Nestorah's eyes.

Slowly passing into and merging with Nestorah, Jenn passed on and was astounded to come face to face with her best friend in the whole universe. It was Miriam!

Jenn was speechless as the soft image slowly focused into the features that haunted her dreams.

"I told you I would never abandon you, Jenn, and I do, with all my soul, accept you as one with me."

Jenn found herself crying with tears of joy. She'd heard what Raphael said, but it hadn't seemed real. Now she knew Raphael and Miriam were really part of the same person. Strange and confused thoughts swirled through Jenn's mind. When Raphael tried to explain this to her, it hadn't made much sense because she couldn't actually see Miriam. Oh, at times she sensed Miriam in Raphael's mannerisms, but he was a man, not a woman. Now here she was, her long-lost friend, the beautiful face she thought she would never see again. She did have both Raphael and Miriam with her! Miriam smiled as her face began to shimmer and Jenn passed into and became a part of her.

Then a misty apparition began to form in front of her. Jenn couldn't understand what was happening since there had been nine women with whom she'd merged together and Raphael which made ten. Everybody knew Magum meant ten. The image of an ancient and withered face came into focus and Jenn couldn't see her features, which were encrusted with age, except for the thin line of her mouth and a small protrusion of her nose. Only her eyes seemed to be alive; they were sparkling black and sad. Jenn could see eternity without end in them and found herself being drawn into their depths and drowning in waves of loneliness and emptiness. She was terrified beyond description.

This ancient face wasn't like the others and awakened something deep in her inner mind that made her feel sad and lonely. The others she could easily accept, but not this one. There were things here she didn't want to see or feel and she tried to push the presence away from her by sheer mental effort, but it kept staring right through her.

From somewhere inside the thin line that was a mouth in this ancient face, came the sweet voice of a little girl.

"I am Miriam, who was Iyam'i, and I do not yet accept you to be as one with me, Jennanine B'Mesziah, until you have become a true sister and accept me for who and what I am." The ancient, withered face began to fade and then receded into a soft cloudy haze, and was gone.

Jenn awoke on the soft bed with a start. Looking over at Raphael, she began to shiver and fought to control her nerves. He looked the same as ever, but she knew who and what he was. She

was frightened, or was it something else? That old mummy-like face of Miriam, or Iyam'i, had unnerved her and she didn't know what to do.

Now Jenn truly knew what a Magum was and somehow wished she didn't. She had so many unanswered questions and troubled thoughts racing through her mind that she was ready to panic. Now it was over and nothing seemed right, so Jenn huddled there for what felt like an eternity before speaking to Raphael.

"Are we a binary now?"

"Yes we are, Jenn," Raphael replied as he sat up and turned on the low bed.

"But . . . but, what about that last person? She said she didn't accept me."

Raphael looked at her and nodded his head. "That's true, but we're a binary-extended just as Ruby authorized. You will always be a part of me, and I a part of you. Something in our inner awareness will always be together and you will never be alone again, Jenn. No matter where you are, dead or alive, we will always be in contact through the substance of our immortal souls."

Jenn paused, then, slipped off the couch onto her feet. Then, they both left room and walked out of the building after saying good-bye to the two security people.

There was still an hour's daylight and the cool autumn air felt refreshing so they decided to walk home. Jenn was strangely silent and appeared disturbed. She was usually talking a kilometer a minute, and discussing anything and everything they encountered. When Raphael asked her what was wrong, she continued on without answering. After a short time, Jenn stopped dead in her tracks. "This is all wrong!"

"What do you mean? Are you upset, Jenn?"

He knew exactly what the problem was, but it was necessary for Jenn to express her feelings openly in words. Everything possible had been done to prepare her for this, but he could only do so much. Jenn was still an elf in her entirety, and Iyam'i knew this better than anyone else. This was a reality that could only be dealt with after the fact, and Jenn would have to deal with it alone. Everyone had to face this same dilemma by themselves when they encountered the challenge of growing up and accepting the responsibility of not only belonging, but being an active part of the sisterhood. Jenn had always referred to her Nashramh sisters as

'they', not 'we' or 'us'. In time she would learn, but unfortunately not for a very long time.

"Yes! This is all wrong. I knew you and Miriam were the same person, but those others! Well, all of them except for that last one are normal. But that old Miriam, or Iyam'i, whatever she's called, I don't accept her. No! I don't accept her and I don't want this thing to happen to us. I want it undone, right now!"

Raphael stood close and put his arm around her shoulder, but Jenn wriggled loose and demanded to return to Council Central to see Ruby. Raphael thought about the matter for a moment, then, without comment, walked back to the building with her. Ruby had warned him that this would probably happen and she'd been right. He wasn't prepared to lose Jenn again, and in this Ruby was in total agreement. The binary arrangement couldn't be forced on Jenn, since she had to really want it herself. At least in this respect, Ruby had her own ways of maintaining a balance of reason and for protecting people, even from themselves, and dealing with Jenn was no exception. Once they arrived, one of the security people escorted Jenn back to the room she'd been in before. Raphael remained in the anteroom. The woman told her to lay on one of the couches and she obeyed.

Just as before, the ceiling and everything changed and Ruby's beautiful image appeared. Jenn was about to speak, but Ruby spoke first.

"I have no time for you, Jennanine B'Mesziah, although I'm allowing you to dissolve this binary arrangement with Raphael only because of him and Miriam whom I hold dear. This binary arrangement was made for them, not for you. If you wish to end it, so be it. Do you want to dissolve this binary now and forever, yes or no?"

"I'd like to talk about it, my Grace," Jenn started to speak.

"You and your personal concerns are of no consequence to me, Jennanine B'Mesziah. You were given a gift of unequalled value and have chosen to reject it. Would you take a precious ruby, and cast it away in the void? Once it's gone, you may never find it again, but that's a lesson you, alone, must learn. I will only ask you one more time. Do you want to dissolve the binary arrangement, yes or no?"

Jenn began to cry. She didn't know what she wanted and she was afraid.

"Well?"

"No. I love Raphael and Miriam and I want to stay with them, but. . . ."

Jenn awoke with a snap. Tears were streaming down her cheeks and her nose was running. The security officer took her by the arm, lifted her from the couch, and led her out of the room. Raphael stood waiting in the anteroom and turned to leave as she approached. The two walked home in silence as the late afternoon sun began to drop toward the western horizon.

This was something that Raphael couldn't help her with. This was so deeply personal that only she could deal with it on her own and come to terms with herself.

Raphael didn't go to bed that night and Jenn laid alone with her thoughts and talking aloud to herself.

"I just can't understand why Ruby was so stern with me. I can't help how I feel. I do love Raphael and Miriam, but that old withered woman . . . she doesn't understand, that's all. Ruby just doesn't understand. She wants me to do something that doesn't feel right." Jenn tried to explain to herself what had come between her and Raphael. Although she loved him dearly, something, or someone, was preventing her from being close to him.

He didn't seem like the same Raphael anymore, and this scared her. Jenn knew their relationship was different because of the binary arrangement although she couldn't put her finger on just how. She wanted things to be the way they had been before . . . she wanted her old Raphael back and to be happy again.

Raphael sat in the darkened living room with his one-year-old baby daughter snuggled in his arms. He spoke to her in a whisper, telling her things he hoped would remain with her for the rest of her life. He didn't know if her brain was developed enough for his words to sink into her binary-three personality, but he spoke the words anyway. He had a terrible feeling this was the last time he would ever see Miri or Jenn in this lifetime and it upset him to leave them now.

Ruby had ordered Raphael to be ready for his assignment while he was waiting for Jenn in the anteroom at Council Central. He'd be going to the seventh-arm rim to serve with the Ansharim Brotherhood on a special project. Her order left no room for disagreement. It was clear Ruby wanted Jenn separated from him, but this wasn't the reason for ordering him away now. Ruby had held up on issuing the order for three months so he, Jenn and

Mirisca could be together longer. This mission wasn't to be taken lightly and had something to do with the Belial, Meseosargon, who'd been taken prisoner.

At least the extended-binary arrangement between both he and Jenn was in effect. Ruby hadn't given Jenn the chance to change her mind and do something she'd regret forever. He had the feeling that Jenn's elfin immaturity and fears would have resulted in separating them for eternity. Now Jenn had time to come to terms with herself while she'd never again be alone. Only his little baby, Mirisca, would be cheated out of the loving care he wanted to shower on her, and he too was being denied the wonderful experience of being a part of her life. There was absolutely no choice for any of them in this case. Every part of him yearned to stay and be with Jenn and Mirisca; even Iyam'i felt the terrible sense of loss as Raphael kissed his sleeping child.

The following morning as Jenn was cooking breakfast for the three of them, Raphael informed her that he was leaving. She'd been silent until now.

"Look at me, Jenn," he demanded, placing his hands firmly on her shoulders so she couldn't turn away. "I know how upset you're feeling and I . . . I'd hoped this binary wouldn't affect you like this. I'd hoped I would have more time to talk with you and help you understand what has happened, and we'd have been able to work things out. I don't want to leave you like this, but I have no choice. It makes saying good-bye so damn hard. It will be a long time before we'll see each other again. I want you to always remember that I love you, Jenn."

Jenn looked at him aghast. He was leaving her? "This is totally unfair! Ruby is sending you away just to punish me, and all I asked for was some time to think things out. It just isn't fair! Not fair at all!" Jenn broke away and turned to face toward the kitchen window. She began sobbing as she leaned over the kitchen counter with her face buried in her hands.

Jenn felt like it was happening all over again. A long time ago, Neftalak had left her and Myrnah. Now Raphael was leaving her and Mirisca. She felt in her bones that she'd never see him again and history was repeating itself.

Raphael kissed her on the head, turned and kissed his little baby who was sitting quietly in her coddle seat, then left. There was nothing more he could really say to her now; she would not or

could not hear him anyway. Jenn didn't understand a lot of things about the sisterhood or Council Central, especially about Ruby. These were things she would have to learn on her own without his help. In fact, she might learn them better without him to lean on.

Raphael left Three-Stones Academy in cryo-freeze, and was immediately placed aboard the Nashramh deep-probe scout destroyer 'SD Eaun Nuask-Vee' for the long voyage to the trailing edge of the Starset's seventh-arm rim. During the entire journey, he remained in continuous contact with Council Central. It was during this period of hibernation that Raphael was briefed and trained for his protracted mission, which was projected to last for the next 700 years. He worried about Jenn and his daughter, although he never asked about them, since he knew he'd never see either of them again during this lifetime.

His mission was to act as a special liaison between the Ansharim and Nashramh, and to monitor the brotherhood's vast seeding program on the primitive rimworlds. He was also to take part in the interface operation being planned by the Nashramh to supply 500,000,000 participants to the program, and to coordinate the development of a combined Necro-Classic Authority to each site.

He was briefed in detail by several hundred varied personalities from Council Central, each of whom was a specialist in one or more facets of the operation. The most striking feature about this project was that a contingent of Meszian elves and members of the Tzian Leven Adah were being introduced into the project. Most of these innocent souls were to be united in a kind of extended binary-marriage with Tachalets from Thebel. These binary groups would be assigned to primitive and hostile planets as a means of training them to defend their own endangered worlds against subversion and infiltration by the enemy. Elves had so much to lose because of their innocence, although they didn't know it. Most of them were like Jenn, trusting in all things and all people. They wouldn't think of harming anything and thought everyone else felt the same way. There was no reason for them to defend anything on Mesziah since there was nothing to defend against, thus they were easy prey for the Adam Belial's Legions of Light to spoil and destroy.

These three special races, in particular, were to be returned to their worlds of origin after 6,000 years service in the project.

Hopefully, the elves would experience enough from the conditions on these target worlds to mature into effective leaders in their own cultures. It was an ambitious program and Raphael wondered if it would really work. His primary concern was to establish the Necro-Classic Authority to deal with these innocent colonists.

It was important to keep track of each individual during the 6,000 years, since nearly every colonist would take on bodies of indigenous races and be required to blend with the population so they could do their assigned jobs. However, it was important not to lose track of their souls especially while they were in corporeal bodies, since each would be encased in a concentric shroud during each life cycle. At the end of their term of service, each soul would be returned to a collection point and then transported back to their point of origin.

Raphael learned the seeding program had been in effect for more than 10,000 years. He made this discovery when, as Miriam on the 'Klikah', he'd encountered an Ansharim monitoring ship that lost in a fight with a black cruiser. This was the 'Tibot', commanded by Arden Ardel.

As Raphael was systematically briefed, pieces of the puzzle and mystery of the seventh-arm began to fall into place. He realized that nothing which he'd experienced in the past, as Miriam, was an accident. He was being prepared for this assignment, and presumably for others to follow for a very long time to come.

During one section of his briefings, a number of people, who were obviously Ansharim Brothers, spoke to him through his Council Central. They outlined the various stages of their seeding program and discussed many of the reasons why it was initiated.

"We determined long ago," said one man's voice, "that the enemy couldn't be defeated in a single battle, such as we experienced during the cataclysm now past. They've been probing in too large an area to be stopped at any one point."

"They're relying on widespread infiltration, subversion, and selective battles to wear us down, are they not?" Raphael noted.

"Yes, they know what they're doing, and there's no simple way to stop them. We know that both Gensargon and Josargon were interested in making a frontal assault on the sixth-arm, but they were also preparing to enter through the seventh-arm all along. That's history now, since they were stopped in their attack on the sixth-arm. Now they've altered their strategy to a broad front of

infiltration all along both arms. We also have evidence that they're salting the other five arms with infiltrators and small fleet contingents consisting of battle-cruisers and auxiliary vessels. We're going to use their strategy against them and install our own watchers and colonists to learn about the infrastructure of each world's diverse cultures, and to impart our own civilizing knowledge to their populations. Only by aiding indigenous cultures to become civilized can we hope to turn them against their alien oppressors."

It was obvious that he would hear and see a great deal more about this subject and all the others once he arrived at his destination.

The twisted corpse of a blond-haired young man lay frozen on a polished metal table, his blue eyes staring out at the bright lights above.

"We found this one in a planetary lander belonging to a sub-grade III industrial culture located out on the seventh-arm rim. The interesting feature in this case, is the lander is ten light-years beyond the culture's farthest limit and can't have been transported to this point in their primitive spaceships. Our dating of material in the lander indicates it left the Oromoan System's second planet, which is the core of the said culture's empire of nine planets, 15 months ago. This situation is interesting since they haven't the technology required for interstellar travel. Their drives are primitive atomics and they haven't developed a gravity plate. Obviously this lander was transported to its entry orbit by a more advanced craft, probably a black cruiser."

"Why is he in such good condition?" Raphael asked, noting that the man's skin hadn't been turned black by the absolute zero temperature of the void.

"It appears a sudden drop in both temperature and cabin pressure alerted him to his danger and he compensated for it by introducing nitrogen into the life-support system. He had an environmental uniform on, although his companions didn't. They died instantly while he froze to death later. By the way, his two companions, a man and woman, were from a race indigenous to the third planet in the system we discovered the lander orbiting in. This is a primitive world where the inhabitants are still sticking each other with sharpened sticks and pieces of metal. They do know how to mine for gold, though."

"Hmm, that's very interesting. Were you able to capture their gamma-complexes?"

"Yes we have them all. This too is interesting since all of them rejected both our red sand crystals and your crystal-fusion process. They were drawn to the black metal we captured during the Great Conflagration, and are stored in there now. By the way, we refer to this black gold-like substance as 'Elcore', since it appears to be the basic, or core material in Samael's galaxy."

Raphael studied the blue-eyed corpse for a time, registering each detail of the man's skin, structure, and general signature into his memory. After that, he asked to see the other two whom he discovered were badly damaged by the cold of space. Their features, although the skin was black from exposure to the vacuum and sub-temperature, were still recognizable. They were short and had coarse hands, black hair and eyes, and yellow teeth that appeared primitive. Their bodies appeared middle-aged, and bore scars and indications of hard living conditions.

"What kind of terrain did these creatures live on?"

"Interesting that you should ask," the bland-faced med-tech noted. "They're both from a high mountain range at the juncture of two colliding continents just above the elliptic of their world. The environment is harsh and the atmosphere thin. You'll note, here on my data sheet, that their lungs and internal organs have slight adaptations to this condition. The majority of their species inhabit much lower altitudes and have adapted differently."

"You say they come from high mountains?"

"Yes. We suspect the enemy is entrenching on, or within high mountains that're generally inaccessible to native populations. It appears to fit the mold of the Legions of Light, who make use of thin atmospheres and high places for their cities and military emplacements."

"I take it you know a great deal about this planet, the third one I believe you said?"

"Frankly, no, our pioneer groups haven't had time to make any inroads there, and all we have that's accurate are photomaps of the surface terrain. We plan a far more detailed investigation of the mineral and geologic structure in the near future. The discovery of these people has come as a surprise though, since this planet is quite far in from the outer rim. In fact it's the deepest penetration we're aware of that the Legions of Light have made."

"I'm surprised you haven't made a geologic investigation before placing pioneers there."

"Oh, we have the usual civilian quality surveys of those structures, but not the intensely detailed material we consider of real value. You'll be well-briefed on this at a later time, believe me."

* * *

"Hey Miri, I made us some spice tea and sweet berry rolls. Would you like to come into my room and we can cuddle on the bed and enjoy our morning snack together? What do you say?"

"Sounds great Mommy, I'll be right there."

"Good! I can tell you more about the 'Never-ending Story' that Miriam used to tell me. Come up on the bed and sit with me. Here, put this blanket over your legs to keep warm."

"Now I'll tell you about the great party that took place in the Enchanted Forest. Let's see now, how did it start . . . hmm. Oh yes, there was an elfin couple named Neki and Mesker who wanted to throw a party for all their friends. There wasn't any particular reason for having the party other than it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Tell me about the Enchanted Forest, mommy." Miri's face was intent and her eyes wide with wonder.

"I'll describe it a little later in the story, okay?"

"Okay, I can wait."

"Well, first of all, there are all kinds of things people have to consider before a grand party commences, such as who will be invited to the party, and how the invitations will be worded. And of course, they have to decide what the menu will be, who will bring what, how long the party should be, and so on and so forth. Finally, after all the decisions are made, the faeries take the invitations up to far-off mountains and deliver them to the High Elves."

"What are they like Mommy?"

"Well, the High Elves from the mountains used to be rather odd in appearance, but as they had more to do with people from outside their world over a long period of time, they changed a lot. In fact, many of them look just like you and me right now."

"They do?"

"Oh yes indeed. They used to have dark skin that would blend in with the trees and bushes around them, and to this day some of

them have small antennae on their heads. They used their antennae for sensing things around them, like a combination of hearing and feeling at the same time. Their eyes used to be very large, almost too big for their heads, so that they could see colors and everything else in the dark. They are very sensitive and can hear all sorts of voices in the wind, rushing water, rolling tides, and even from the very ground they stand on."

"They really sound neat. Maybe one of the High Elves will come to my birthday party, what do you think?"

"You can never tell what the future has in store for us, or for you, my little sweetheart.

"Now where was I, oh yes, the invitations."

* * *

The temperature and pressure outside this newly established base was beyond human endurance, even in normal environmental uniforms, although there was oxygen in the atmosphere. Raphael sat in a swivel chair and studied the mirror screen in which the steamy dark landscape outside was depicted in minute detail. Dull green forms of alien plant life were abundant beyond the barrier wall, and seemingly endless rain pelted the dense forest while a mass of slithering mud snakes worked their way along the wall's energized base.

Something about the tingling discharges from the glowing energy field excited the snakes as they pressed against its deadly currents. Some of the creatures returned 12 times before succumbing to the charge, only to be followed by others bent on an orgy of suicide. According to Brother Toumoul, this happened during the rainy season. Every measure taken to ward off the reptiles failed and the waxy-skinned creatures came from ten kilometers away to join the carnage. Something about the scintillating force field fascinated them beyond reason. Thus far, no other means had been devised to keep the innocent creatures out and the force field was absolutely necessary to combat deadly bacteria and infectious viruses that infested this world. A special micro-mesh fence fabricated from a tough noncorroding material was ordered to act as a buffer between the mud snakes and the barrier wall, but it hadn't arrived yet.

The day before, when Raphael first arrived at this Ansharim outpost, he'd been shown three corpses of enemy personnel.

They'd penetrated deeper into the seventh-arm rim than any previously encountered, and their derelict vessel was discovered by chance. Today's briefing should shed light on the situation, but until then, he had his private thoughts and time to wind down from the long voyage to this primitive world. Outside, the slithering creatures kept edging up to the energized force field to experience its strange tingling death.

* * *

"Now where was I, oh yes, the invitations. So, anyway, the faeries take the invitations up to the mountain elves. Of course they must have Mister Grump's permission to do so. Nobody will ever pass up to those mountains unless Mister Grump says it's alright, otherwise he'll become very angry." Jenn's funny voice spoke out in his inner mind.

"Who's Mister Grump, Mom?" a chirpy voice chimed in.

"Why, Mister Grump is a mountain, of course."

"I didn't know that mountains could get mad."

"Oh, believe me he can get mad! He'll rumble, jerk, and make all kinds of noise indefinitely. You should hear the story about him and his next door neighbor. It's enough to make you shake your head."

"Oh my, this Mesziah sounds neat!" the happy little voice chirped.

Smiling to himself, Raphael realized there was more to this binary-extended than he'd realized. With his new-found ability, he'd go through Council Central again to find out how Jenn and Mirisca were faring. All he'd have to do was, concentrate on Jenn and he'd be in communication with her. He wondered if Jenn had the same ability as he did. A voice, not Ruby's, whispered in his mind. "No, only you have this ability Raphael." Now he was actually experiencing a conversation between Jenn and his little girl, Mirisca. It suddenly occurred to him that her fifth birthday would be on the tenth of Demin, only a month away - God, how he missed the two of them.

* * *

The new micro-mesh fence finally arrived and was being installed by heavily suited construction workers. A temporary four-

meter-high earthen wall was bull-dozed around the entire facility to keep the mud snakes out of the construction zone, but proved to be of no real value, since they burrowed through it and many slithered up and over it. There was no distracting the poor creatures from the attraction of the energized force field.

"I'll tell you this, Raphael," Kroubel, the environmental technician droned on. "When this fence is fully installed, our little slithery friends will soon lose all interest and go back home."

"I wouldn't make any bets on that," Raphael smiled.

"What you haven't seen, dear friend, is that we've buried the fencing six meters straight down and have a lip facing out and away from the fence for another three meters. This, coupled with the total height of four meters above the ground, makes an effective barrier in itself. But! We have other little tricks up our sleeves!"

"What, pray tell, could those be?"

"We are introducing a neutralizing charge in the micro-mesh fence that'll reduce the impact to the force field at that point which is 2.3 meters from the focal plate of the energy field and 2.9 meters from the barrier wall. Now how do you like those ginmallows?"

"I'm impressed. It'll certainly solve our problems with those little creatures."

"It's worth the time and effort, dear boy. We didn't come here to wreak havoc on the local life forms. We're banking a lot on the little guys losing interest and going home. Otherwise, it's back to the old drawing board."

One hundred and twenty-seven men and women crowded into the softly lit lecture theater and quickly seated themselves in deep-cushioned seats to await their morning briefing. All but seven of the people had just arrived at the outpost and recovered from cryo-freeze the evening before, therefore they were all eager to hear what was about to be said.

A tall, bony woman walked out on the stage and placed a sheath of plasti-knap sheets on the rostrum. She stood there for a short time looking up at the assorted faces of her audience, as if searching for a particular person.

"Good morning my friends and associates," she began, "I'm sure you're all thawed out now and eager to discover what we have to offer you. My name is, by the way, Collen HaMut of the Ansharim Brotherhood, and I will be the sole speaker at this briefing. I wish

to point out that we have a number of guest operatives from the Nashramh Sisterhood among us who will be sharing our knowledge and contributing to our seeding project."

There was a murmur from the group and a few heads looked around to see if there were any strange faces among them.

"If you will each come down to the stage as I call out your names, I'd like our people to become acquainted with each of you from the very start. First Brother-Magum Raphael B'Thebel of the Nashramh's Council Central," she paused as Raphael stood up and then made his way down to the stage. "I welcome you to our midst, my Grace," she smiled.

"Thank you, Collen."

"Now for our other guests, Sister Lynn Coytel, Sister Holen B'Dimak, Sister Kondo B'Eade, Sister Quinn Mavis, Sister Keralee Simmin, and Sister Estel B'Souktah, welcome to our midst my dear friends."

Raphael watched each woman as she approached the stage. He remembered Lynn Coytel, the Odomak he'd met, as Miriam, on the Starship Supreme G.C.C. 'Freeworld', and also Quinn Mavis, Helene Ness' adjutant on the 'Cardinel'. Keralee Simmin was the special courier who'd aided in the destruction of Samael Agboler back in five-N-six. He knew Keralee completed her mission, but had died in the process. The others were new to him.

"I want you to know our sisterhood allies have sent us the best they have, and there are many thousands more on the way to join with us. The very fact we have a Nashramh Magum assigned to our project is a wonder, and a signal of true commitment, since they lost 104,000 Sisters-Magum during the Cataclysm, most of which have not been found. Each of our friends here are gamma-binaries of more than seven, and all are the very best available in their fields of expertise. It is our official policy to share all of our knowledge with our Nashramh allies and withhold nothing from them. This project is too important to allow anything to interfere with its success. Thank you, my dear friends."

Raphael and his co-sisters returned to their seats during a period of general approval from the rest of the people present.

Collen began by giving a background appraisal of the project and the enemy's movements in the general seeding area. She also noted that experimental colonists were being supplied by the Nashramh to beef up the training phase of the program and that

many of these newcomers were little elves from a wondrous world called Mesziah. She went on to discuss the military situation along the seventh-arm and it became apparent to Raphael that these people weren't members of the Ansharim's armed forces or special fighting contingents, but an assemblage of both missionary and intelligence operatives who were experts at infiltrating and blending in with local populations. They were an intelligent-looking group who knew what they were about.

"Perhaps," Collen was saying, "the enemy strategy, and the main thrust of their foreseeable actions, will be focused on the leading edge of the sixth-arm and moving along tangentially to the trailing edge where they plan to engage us in a series of pitched battles. Their primary intention is to draw us into the area and wear us down, depleting our resources in the process. Meanwhile, they're increasing their presence on the far outer rim of this seventh-arm, which appears to be their real zone of entry. We've discovered one of their penetration teams in the area of TA-40063M which is quite deep in the trailing edge of this arm. In fact, it's their deepest penetration that we've yet discovered. We are, therefore, combating this thrust by training a new kind of voluntary force mixed with combat veterans retrieved from the old battle zones on the outer sixth-arm rim. These veterans are, by the way, all volunteers and mostly Odomaks and associated races."

Raphael already knew all about this from his briefings by members of Council Central, but realized that hearing the same material from a different perspective was definitely of value.

"We've developed our own versions of the enemy's weapons systems and protective shields, which combined with our cloaking devices and the Robel drive, makes us at least equal and possibly superior to them. Size and magnitude of firepower are a real problem. We don't have the vast resources the enemy employs in his construction of battle cruisers, and nothing to compare with his capital ships. Thus, we, the Nashramh, and the G.C.C. are engaged in joint operations to systematically search for and destroy enemy operational centers and naval units. Our goal is to inflict as much damage as possible on their administrative installations, military bases, battle fleet, and logistic centers, while disrupting every form of supply and communications along their line of infiltration."

Raphael was sitting back and listening to Collen drone on with the obvious and therefore uninteresting portion of her long presentation, when something new was added.

"We've also disrupted their operations in a far more important way," she spoke casually. "Our combined forces have infiltrated an enemy communications center and captured a Belial and several of his priests and praetorians alive. They're now in our possession and being interrogated by our intelligence people at a special research facility."

"Good!" Raphael thought to himself. It was a positive sign that they were sharing this sensitive information with their people, especially the fact that the G.C.C. was a part of the operation.

"We've discovered from the Belial, that many of our closely guarded secrets are in fact not really unknown to the enemy. For instance, they're well aware of the actual speed of the Nashramh's and our own Robel III drive units along with many of our other security systems. They don't know how the systems actually work, nor do they appear to comprehend what the underlying principles are. But, they do know about how each system performs and something of its design criteria."

Collen continued discussing other disclosures as the assembly sat in silence as each fact was revealed to them. Raphael wasn't surprised when Collen omitted to mention the enemy also knew about how Magums communicated, although they couldn't figure out how to tap in on this system of transmitting a composite of human emotion, awareness and abstract thought patterns to these special personalities. Nor did they understand how the Magum or binary arrangement was brought about.

"So, we're in a very small galaxy," Keralee Simmin smiled as she grasped Raphael's hand. "I never doubted our paths would one day meet."

"You know me then?"

"As Sister-Magum Miriam B'Meszhiah, yes, we've never met," she said turning to an Odomak woman standing next to her, "but we were engaged in special courier assignments at the same time and with similar responsibilities. I unfortunately didn't make it out alive at the time."

"Yes, but you did succeed," Raphael nodded. "I'm glad to be here on another 'similar assignment' with you. Have you met our Odomak sister yet? Lynn Coytel, is it not?"

"Yes, my Grace, we've met before." Lynn bowed, and then smiled. "At least this time I know who and what you are. I won't be making the same mistake twice."

"You have a long memory, Lynn."

"Oh yes, for nearly fatal errors."

"How long have they known about the Belial and the information that was extracted from him?" Keralee asked, ignoring the conversation between Raphael and Lynn.

"For more than a year," he spoke softly. "There was a great deal more that Collen didn't disclose during the lecture, and I suspect we'll find the enemy has many more surprises in store for us. Suffice it that we're dealing with creatures who keep perfect records of everything and are able to discover some of our most closely guarded secrets from them. They haven't as yet, learned anything from the few of our sisters whom they've captured and have underestimated their value. Our captured sisters have resisted their captors and seem to have given up nothing in the form of useful information, and none have been impressed into the enemy's service."

The six Nashramh women, who now surrounded him, nodded in agreement, although they were surprised that none were forced to break down under torture and reveal what they knew to their alien captors. Raphael spoke to each of the women, in turn, beginning with Keralee, Lynn, and Quinn with whom he'd been associated while embodied as Miriam. The other three were all new to him, although they knew all about his past. Each woman made a specific appointment with Raphael to get to know him better and find out what the latest information was from Council Central. It was obvious that this phase of his assignment wouldn't be boring, or uneventful, since there was so much to be learned from both his Nashramh sisters and from the Ansharim contingent before moving on.

Chapter 13

Birthday

Life is a bittersweet unfurling of events and emotions, as Raphael discovered on Miri's fifth birthday, during one of many incidents he was to experience throughout his years out on the seventh-arm rim.

10:30-10 DEMIN 8311-7N5

Jenn rechecked each detail of the place-settings for Miri's birthday party guests. She'd spread her best table-cloth over the dining room table and made up each setting with a plate, bowl, fork and spoon. She added bright pink pulpa cups full of assorted nuts and berries, and alongside each fork on the left, there were little wooden pipes she and Miri bought the day before at the commissary. Jenn had set a large pulpa bowl of fruit out in the middle of the table, and glanced overhead where five blown-up balloons dangled from the chandelier. The door prize and game prize were wrapped and marked accordingly. And then there were, of course, Miri's birthday presents from Aunty Rinim and mommy, wrapped in beautiful lavender pulpa-paper with bright ribbons and big fluffy bows. The apartment was clean and everything in it sparkled. This even impressed Jenn as she stood back, admiring her fine work of art and careful loving touches.

Rinim opened the front door and followed Miri into the brightly decorated apartment. The two had been out for a morning walk while Jenn made preparations for the party.

"Now it's time to put on our favorite dress and comb our hair," Jenn sang out, "and put on our best shoes-n-socks."

"Oh yes, we must get ready. Your little friends are about to arrive," Rinim added.

The first guests began arriving a few moments after Miri dressed and she ran to the door to greet them. Rinim and Jenn remained inside and listened to the children giggling and talking together as they approached.

"Hello, Gabie and Rosie, glad you made it to my party."

"Hello Miri. Happy birthday! Here's your present! I hope you like it," Rosie laughed.

"Here is mine too," Gabie chimed in. "Happy birthday!"

"Oh yes. I'm sure I will! Thank you both. Aunty Rinim will show you where to put your coats. I have to open the door for someone else, just a moment," Miri stated politely.

"Happy birthday, Miri, I hope this is a good party."

"Good to see you Gwenn, thank you. I think this is going to be a great party! Come on in!"

"Oh! That's really a pretty dress, Gwenn."

"Thanks, Rosie! My mommy picked this out for me. I like it too."

"Well, here comes Inez and good old Lelah up the walk-way," Gabie tittered as she looked out the front door, "so don't bother closing the door yet."

"Happy birthday Miri, hope it's your fifth 'cause my mom got you a birthday card with the number five on it. Inez's mom made her make a card for you." Lelah leaned over with her hand cupped. "It's not very good, but don't tell her because you might hurt her feelings. This is one of those things you just make believe, and for everybody concerned, they just go along with it."

Miri shook her head and thought to herself, "That's good old Lelah."

The girls all filed giggling and chattering into the dining room and sat down after saying hello to Jenn and Aunty Rinim. Jenn always loved having Miri's happy little friends over to the apartment. It really didn't matter if there was a special occasion or not, because they never ceased to amaze her. Their informal conversations and funny little ways pleased Rinim as well.

As the girls were busy chit-chatting about everything and nothing of value, Rinim, smiled to herself and studied each one. Rosie sat with her thumb stuck in her mouth watching the other girls. She was all dolled up in a floral dress and a matching bow that was fastened to a short tuft of hair. Next, there was Gwenn

talking up a storm. Gwenn didn't wear frilly dresses and, as a matter of fact, Rinim couldn't remember the last time the child wore one. Stylish in her own way, Gwenn's mother knew she wouldn't wear anything else but a straight-cut dress that was two shades of blue. Her red hair was always parted straight as an arrow down the middle of her head and pulled back and fastened tightly by two blue clips. The child never seemed to take a breath between sentences. She wasn't exactly what Rinim considered a femme fatale.

Rinim sipped some of her own libation as she continued to study the happy children. Inez sat next to Gwenn. She was decked out in a lovely green dress that matched her eyes with perfection while her hair was a soft flaxen and arranged in large curls. Inez was a quiet, very proper, serious and studious girl who preferred to listen and only chose to speak when she thought it necessary. She would smile when something funny was said and never raised her voice when she did speak. If she couldn't be heard over Gwenn, she surmised it probably wasn't important anyway. Nothing seemed to bother her and she enjoyed her friends.

Opposite these three bright wonders, Rinim turned her attention to Gale. She was a lovely child, clad in purple pants with a matching purple floral print shirt. Her hair was short and coal-black, pulled back with a wreath of pink flowers. Gale liked to match. She'd phoned Jenn earlier that morning asking her what the color scheme of the day would be. To Gale's right sat Gabie. Gabie usually spoke her mind, which unfortunately got her into trouble from time to time. She had kinky brown hair that rippled down into a pony tail at the base of her neck. She wore a lovely white organdy dress with roses showing from underneath the first layer. Rinim noticed she had two bandages on her knees which indicated she'd been roughing it out on the campus earlier in the day.

Lelah was seated across from Miri. She liked to run the show at all times, but relinquished the floor because it was Miri's birthday. She wore a brown dress with a matching vest and had a scratch on her cheek which matched the ones on her forearm and knees. Lelah was a funny-looking little character with orange hair tied into two braids which stuck straight out at either side of her round face. She had a cute gap between her two front teeth and her black eyes sparkled when she talked. If there was a rule, Lelah knew the

reason behind it. She had to know the reason for everything. If she didn't get a satisfactory answer, she'd wait for a week, then, asked again.

Miri was Rinim's favorite little person for more than one reason, but as a child she brought the old Magum a great deal of pleasure. There she sat like a true princess at the head of the table. She was so proud of her mother and appreciated all the trouble Mom had gone through to make this one of the best parties that a five-year-old could possibly have. Rinim thought to herself that she was surely blessed to have both Jenn and Miri with her at this time in history. It was a real treat.

* * *

There were 108 disciplined and experienced troopers in Kutulusargon's 20th legion's raiding party, all armed with M-405 H.L. laser rifles and ten Themaline TF-8 high impact fragmenting grenades. Twenty men were equipped with nerve gas generators and ten with wave scramblers and electronic jamming devices. Their dull grey-green camouflage capes and uniforms blended perfectly with the surrounding vegetation, and only the steady movement of their feet disclosed that anything was amiss.

Jamnar Roen-naiet was the mission commander. He knew all aspects of the terrain and the upcoming target. He'd studied the enemy's defense structure and the layout of their communications terminal from every intelligence source available. The primary facility was almost a carbon copy of others he'd encountered in the past and was well-designed for defense, but had the obvious drawback of an energized force field around it to provide protection against the planet's multitudes of deadly viruses. This field not only disclosed their exact location, but interfered with their multibase, electronic, and infrared intruder detection systems. Their detection units were further hampered by a static-neutralizing fence installed outside the shield to discourage local serpents from being killed by its intense energy. This stupid sentimentality over the lives of lesser creatures would prove to be their downfall.

Jamnar's mission was to destroy the facility and to butcher its operations crew, which intelligence sources estimated to be less than 100. His own survey of the facility from high orbit left him in doubt as to the site's actual function, since, in addition to the

usual array of dish antennas and support structures, there were indications of large underground spaces located beneath a low hill next to the landing pad. These could be warehouse facilities, for this and other stations in the neighborhood, or something else. There were also three orbiting fighter craft overhead instead of the usual one. No matter what the facility's actual reason, Jamnar planned to detonate its power station and level the entire area for 20 kilometers. The three fighter craft would be engaged by his support ship once the ground raid was over. He'd taken every precaution to ensure that no news of this attack was reported to the enemy's central headquarters, so further traps could be set for what appeared to be regular relieving forces known to be en route to this site.

The column came to a halt two kilometers from the enemy's northern perimeter, where a stream bed ran to within 100 meters of the facility's barrier fence. The shallow stream wound down to the edge of the dense forest they'd passed through. It offered cover from observation. Jamnar's plan was to move along the stream and to attack the station's greenhouse from the nearest point. Breaching the fence and energy shield was no problem, but entering the guarded airlocks into the greenhouse required split-second timing and perfect coordination. Prisoners were not to be taken. All of his troopers were to maintain radio silence and follow his detailed attack plan without deviation. Their lightning-quick and silent operation would take the enemy by surprise and be over before any real defensive effort could be mounted. This tactic had worked many times before, and this facility wasn't any different from the others, with the exception of its warehouse feature. Every trooper knew his job, and none doubted the outcome. Nodding, Jamnar motioned his shock group to move ahead of the main body and make for the airlock.

* * *

Out came the ginmallow cake and mallow cream! Miri lit each bright green candle placed in a special holder used for special occasions. Then the children dug into their goodies, talking and laughing about all the very important things in their short lives. Rinim and Jenn picked up the plates and silverware, after the

children devoured every last crumb, and then brought out the lovely gift packages and placed them in front of the birthday girl.

Miri opened each package carefully as her six friends looked on. First there was a stack of pretty pink notepads to write on, which came with a bright pink pen and pencil. Then she opened a book of poems and nursery rhymes. After she opened each gift, Miri thanked each girl for all the lovely and useful gifts that she'd received. Rinim had given her a book full of tales that dealt with morals and ethics, along with funny little riddles. It was written in a manner much like Rinim's, in which the reader wasn't sure what the point was, but learned valuable lessons that remained with them for the rest of their lives.

The last gift was from her mother. Jenn had made her a rag doll that was a third of a meter-long and had a soft smiling face with buttons for eyes and nose, red yarn for its mouth and hair, and funny-looking clothing.

"Her name is 'Ginger' and she's just like my doll that I had a long time ago," Jenn spoke softly. "My doll was my very best friend until I met Miriam at summer camp."

"Oh yes," Rinim added. "Your friend Ginger was a very important friend to have."

This was definitely the best birthday a five-year-old could possibly have. After the gifts were opened, the children left the table and played some games, one of which was pin the flames on the Mnemex. Jenn drew a beautiful picture of a Mnemex on a large piece of illustration board. None of the other girls had ever seen such a creature and had no idea of what it was, so she explained that it breathed out flames and ate little children for lunch. The flames, which the blindfolded girls were to pin on the terrible beast, were made of starched red cloth that made them appear to be real. Each girl was blindfolded and then twirled around in circles before being let loose to pin the flames on the Mnemex's mouth.

"Come on, Gabie, you can do it!" Rosie proclaimed, while the other girls cheered on.

"Oh no, she pinned the flames on his foot! Better luck next time, Gabie," Gail encouraged her, patting Gabie on the back.

"Who's going to be next?" Jenn asked.

"Hey, let Auntie Rinim do it!" Gwenn chimed in. "Auntie Rinim has to have fun too."

Everybody cheered as Rinim reluctantly allowed herself to be blindfolded and twirled around in a circle. It bothered her that she knew exactly where to pin the flames, so she decided to cheat a little and appear to not know where she was going. It wasn't fair to outdo these lovely little children at their party. Besides, she'd rather they laughed at her and felt comfortable around her.

"Aunty Rinim, you're going the wrong way," Miri whispered, as Gail nudged her in the right direction.

Rinim made a convincing show of being lost and pinned the flames on the corner of the illustration board, missing the big Mnemex altogether.

"Better luck next time, Aunty Rinim," Gabie soothed.

* * *

Raphael smiled to himself in his sleep as he saw, felt, and heard the activities of the birthday party through both Jenn and Rinim. He admired Rinim's acting ability, since she fumbled just enough to be convincing without overdoing it. God, how he wished he was really there with all of them.

Something tugged at his mind, pulling him away from the gay little party, and he forced himself to concentrate on visualizing Rinim's observations. He loved looking at Miri's bright happy face and shining eyes as she laughed and chattered with her six little friends.

The advance troops bypassed the fence's security alarm and used a wave scrambler to breach the glowing force field. Nineteen men ducked quickly through the opening and made for the security airlock leading into the greenhouse facility.

Two unsuspecting security guards were killed without a sound, and the team moved into the airlock and neutralized its overlapping warning systems. Now the main body of troops moved in behind them and spread out into the large garden area and quickly killed the 15 technicians working there.

* * *

"Hey, Gwenn is next," Jenn prompted.

"Let Gwenn, be next!" Miri chimed in.

"Yay, come on Gwenn! You can do it!" the other girls cheered her on. "You can do it!"

"Where will Gwenn pin the flames? Around and around she goes and where she'll pin it, nobody knows."

"Oh no, she missed it. Hey, you got it in his eye, Gwenn."

"Yeah, good try, Gwenn."

"How about Inez, Mommy? Let her go next."

"Yeah, let Inez go next, she's always last," Lelah added in a very supportive tone.

"Okay, Inez, let's get the blindfold on you. Now, around and around she goes . . ." Jenn chanted the little saying.

"Oh great ginmallows, she did it! She got the flames coming out of the Mnemex's mouth! Good work Inez!" Lelah cried out. The others chimed in, "Yeah, good work, Inez."

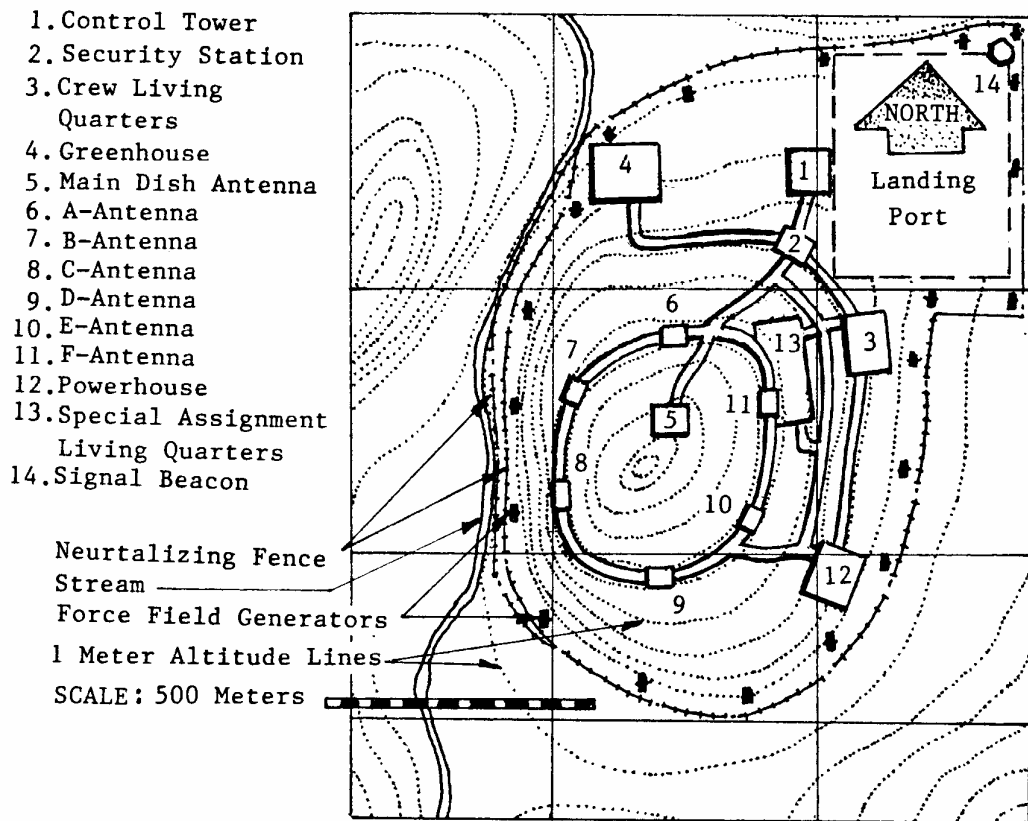
Inez was proud of herself as she stood there with a big smile. Jenn handed Inez her prize, a geometric puzzle in bright pink.

"That's a killer puzzle," Lelah informed her. "This puzzle is guaranteed to make you go goofy with frustration. It's really neat!"

"Thank you. This is the neatest party I've ever been to, and just think, I won the prize."

"It's your turn Lelah! You can. . . ."

* * *



Raphael was suddenly awakened by an odd sensation. Tugging desperately at his mind, it overrode his delightful interlude into the birthday party. He didn't know why, but he felt the facility was in terrible danger from some unknown source, possibly an attack.

Moving quickly, Raphael dressed and checked his laser pistol to ensure it was properly charged. It was, and he kept it in his hand as he pressed the comm-link on his desk. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary, but the security office line was busy. He opened his cabin door carefully and moved down the hall to Lynn Coytel's door and knocked lightly. The door opened immediately and Lynn motioned him to come in, then, shut it behind him.

"I'm almost dressed, Raphael," she whispered. "I don't know what's going on, but I can feel trouble. Everything's too quiet and I have an odd feeling in the back of my mind."

"Me too, we'll gather the others and form fighting units. Then, we can check this thing out. If we're wrong, then we can call it a drill . . . if not. . . ."

"Good. Let's go."

The raiding party penetrated 100 meters down the main tunnel leading from the greenhouse before meeting their first resistance. Four lead troopers were cut down by a single security guard before he was eliminated. This came as a surprise, since they weren't in the main security ring and there shouldn't have been any guards in this area. At least there'd never been in any of the other facilities, and thus far this one was constructed in the same layout. Jamnar gave a hand signal to his lead scouts to precede the main body by a minimum of 20 meters and keep a low profile as they moved along the empty corridors. Moments later, another security guard opened fire on the raiders and killed two point men before he too was brought down by deadly laser fire.

Within moments the party reached the security ring and main terminal. They were met by intense fire from the guard headquarters. They were prepared for this and quickly silenced the defenders before any further alarm could be sounded, if any had been sent out before their jamming devices were placed into operation. Jamnar's communications sappers were interrupting the facility's internal signals from the moment they entered the greenhouse airlock. The wave jamming device was perfect for this kind of operation since the defenders couldn't detect that their equipment was being neutralized. The first two security guards must have been roving the halls in just the right place at the wrong time.

"Praise be to my Sweet Sargon," Jamnar whispered to himself, "we will bless your holy name this day. Praise, praise be to you my Sweet Sargon."

Lynn knocked at each door on the lower dormitory level, waking those who were still asleep, and notified them of the suspected trouble. Raphael did the same on the upper level while he relayed his suspicions to Council Central. They readily agreed on immediate military action. Oddly, the other five Nashramh women had the same strange feelings and were awakened by them, although nothing had happened yet to justify their precautions. None of them were willing to take any chances by ignoring the signs.

The raiding party moved quickly as each combat group made for its predetermined targets. There were 14 primary structures to

be seized, counting the warehouse area, and their crews butchered. These targets consisted of the greenhouse and security station now in their control, seven antenna guidance buildings along the inner security ring, the crew living complex, the powerhouse, the launch headquarters, the landing beacon, and last, the warehouse facility.

Jamnar divided his force into four attack groups, with his own contingent of communications specialists taking up a command position in the captured security station. All four attack groups were now racing along the well-lit tunnels to their targets, which they overwhelmed with lightning precision. Everything moved smoothly and on schedule with no further signs of resistance. His communications signals, now coming in on a secret wave band, indicated 61 enemy security men and technicians killed, and all but three objectives were taken. The attacking teams would reach them within a few minutes and the fight would be over.

Suddenly, something wrong was happening. Jamnar's signal man announced sharp reports of concerted resistance in the tunnels at the approaches to both sides of the powerhouse and the southeast 'D' antenna guidance building. Somehow, the enemy discovered the assault and was mounting a fierce and determined resistance. Three of his main attack groups were taking heavy casualties and the enemy was making a good stand of it. Jamnar checked his facility blueprint and considered alternate plans in case of more surprises.

A sharp pain cut through Lynn's left shoulder and arm as a needle-thin burst of laser energy shot diagonally upward and sliced her flesh and bone like a razor. She screamed out a short warning as she spun and dropped to the concrete floor. She ignored the pain and shot at her nearly invisible assailant, who was firing from a prone position 20 meters away. Her first shot missed, but the second one split the man's head open with a burst of blue flame. Suddenly, there were a dozen weaving bodies working their way down the tunnel towards her and she cut one of them down before the others dropped prone to the deck and returned her fire. From behind her, another shaft of laser energy beamed up along the corridor towards the attacking party. Then the corridor was lit by an array of bursts that cut into the stone walls and burned flesh on both sides, as each force threw all it had into the conflict.

A steady flow of blood draining from her burned shoulder, Lynn tried to concentrate on the nearest moving targets and carefully aimed each of her shots, many of which missed their mark. Her head was swimming as she squeezed off her last shot; then, she fainted from loss of blood. The man had just made a forward rush toward the defenders in order to lob a grenade into their midst when Lynn's shot burned his chest and stomach open. He was dead before he hit the floor, and the grenade exploded in his hand, killing four of his nearby comrades.

Raphael moved along the corridor in the opposite direction from Lynn's group, and came in behind a contingent of fully engaged enemy troops who were inflicting heavy casualties on the Ansharim defenders of the facility's power station. His group opened fire and killed a number of enemy soldiers before six loud reports of fragmentation grenades exploded in front of him, killing several of his people and stunning others. The blasts nearly deafened him, but he continued to move forward down the corridor, firing low along the deck. He measured his shots to flush the prone enemy troopers who were laying down a blanket fire, while their comrades attempted to advance back against this new force. He could see the effect of his shots, as puffs of smoke from burning flesh shot up into the dense air.

Keralee pressed against the opposite wall and directed her fire at a small number of advancing troops now coming from the opposite direction. These were three of Jamnar's communications people who'd been ordered into the fray. They were all fresh and moved with the precision of expert fighters, but Keralee made short work of them. Further back along the tunnel, she could hear the approach of more troopers who were reinforcing the three men she'd just killed. At the same time she saw the first elements of Ansharim people who'd just formed into a battle group coming from the living area she and Raphael had left a short time before. She directed them to face the rear and make ready for the advancing enemy.

Within moments, accurate and deadly fire from the defenders cut the enemy to pieces. They tried desperately to reassert their attack, but couldn't muster the firepower. Not one enemy soldier turned and ran, and every one stood his ground and died fighting. Their laser rifles were their only effective weapon, since grenades were counter-productive in the narrow tunnels.

Quinn Mavis and Holen B'Dimak took another tunnel leading to the beleaguered powerhouse and engaged the enemy there. Kondo B'Eade went to aid Lynn in the tunnel leading to the main dish antenna. Determined Ansharim technicians fought off enemy troopers at the 'D' antenna block and at the powerhouse, not yielding a centimeter of ground to the intruders.

The surprise attack by large numbers of unknown defenders shocked Jamnar for a moment. Then, he decided on an alternate plan to accomplish his mission. He redirected his four groups to concentrate on the powerhouse and to take it at all costs. If he couldn't wipe out the enemy defenders by military actions, then he'd blow them all to atoms when he detonated the reactors. In the interim, he ordered his special troopers, armed with canisters of nerve gas, to flood the tunnels immediately.

Red lights began flashing as hidden detectors sensed the presence of 'Taktow D-80' nerve gas in the ventilation system. Automatically, all systems were diverted into the exhaust mode and both the tunnels and habitable spaces were flushed with high-pressure air. This was in turn, sucked up into giant exhaust fans and out through energized filters that destroyed the deadly material on contact. No casualties among the Ansharim defenders occurred because of the lethal gas. The intruders, who thought their foes, would be out of action within seconds, made determined rushes to overwhelm them before gas masks could be donned. This was a fatal error. Before Jamnar or his lieutenants could correct the problem, half of his remaining forces were cut down. He may have been surprised by these primitive unbelievers, but he wouldn't let his Sweet Sargon down under any circumstances. He had enough experience in the field to know that the tide of battle could always be adversely reversed, and had contingency plans for just such an event.

"Backup unit," he spoke evenly into his comm-trans unit, "this is control officer 'J'. We have met unexpected resistance from the enemy. Exercise plan B-2 immediately."

"As you wish, Excellency," the pilot of his transport craft responded flatly. "I am initiating a low level bombing run on the primary target now."

It was now only a short time before his attacking force would be wiped out, so Jamnar focused all of his remaining men on securing the powerhouse. If he couldn't destroy the facility from within, then

his transport craft would do so with a nuclear device. The troopers fighting in the north-west antenna tunnel and the eastern tunnels were ordered to move to the powerhouse. Immediately, the Ansharim defenders followed them and killed many with harassing fire, and only a handful made it to the fight for the main powerhouse. Within minutes, the enemy intruders were overwhelmed by Ansharim fire and all died where they stood. Jamnar was killed by one of his trooper's grenades that exploded in their midst.

Suddenly, everything was quiet except for the whirring of exhaust fans. The fight was over. Everyone began to search the area for lost comrades, and any sign of enemy survivors.

Lynn Coytel awoke slowly. She was lying on her back and as her eyes focused, she saw Raphael standing above her. She knew who he was, but hadn't really noticed he had the eyes of an ancient one, and from out of the depths of her mind's eye, a small elfin face began to materialize. It was a face, almost forgotten, out of her long dead past. The eyes were the same. They were the eyes of a Magum, but then there was something more to them, and they seemed to be black and as deep and empty as the void of infinity and every bit as frightening as eternity itself. The name 'Miriam' sounded in her mind and she knew this man Raphael was a part of Miriam, or she was a part of him. Whatever the case, they were the same. She'd known this all along intellectually, but something in her inner being just made the discovery! Now, was she thick or something? Lynn was totally confused.

"You'll be in working order shortly, Lynn," Raphael spoke bluntly. "There was some serious damage done to both your arm and shoulder . . . nerves cut and all that. Our Ansharim friends did a first class job putting them all back together and you'll be up and going in a week or so."

"How many did we lose?"

"You were the only Nashramh casualty, but our allies took a real beating. Our last count was 146 dead, 92 wounded, and 59 untouched. All 108 of the enemy troops were killed."

"What about the facility?"

"A shambles, but it'll be back in operation within a few hours. We have a lot of deadly viruses in the air that have to be cleansed out and everyone is being inoculated against everything imaginable. The intruders didn't have time to sap the place. They

were hell-bent on killing off the crew before taking on anything else. Unfortunately there are only 19 of the original crew alive, and 16 of them are badly wounded. On the bright side, we got the enemy commander's document pouch, though. He was killed by a grenade before he could press its detonator trigger. Our three fighter craft were alerted just in time to prevent a further attack from the enemy's armed transport."

"Well, it looks like we got off to a bad start, Raphael. We'll have to work overtime to make up for it."

"Unfortunately you're right, Lynn. Our forces out here have been under constant attack and taking heavy losses for some time. This is the first communications station to survive an assault, and because we have their commander's battle pouch, we know how they've been gaining their successes. Believe me; these bastards are both tough and good. We're in for a rough time, my dear sister."

* * *

The birthday party had been in progress for nearly three and a half hours and it was about time to wrap it up. Rinim left suddenly a half hour earlier, saying she had some very important business to attend to. The seven children played pin the flames on the Mnemex's mouth and another game using the names of animals. Everyone had pulled the name of an animal out of a hat, and then they tried to guess which one it was, after the girl acted it out. None of them did very well in this game, but Rosie got more correct answers than the others and was awarded a cuddly doll Miri had picked out for one of the prizes. Rosie thought it was the greatest thing since her mom got her a pair of roller skates.

Finally, the party came to an end as the girls were growing tired and needed a nap before their dinner. They all said good-bye, tooted happily on their wooden pipes and marched off to their homes. All agreed that this was one of the best parties they'd ever been to, and none would ever forget it.

"Wow that was a great party, Mom! It's too bad Aunty Rinim had to leave so early."

"Well, she had some important business to take care of, but she did have a wonderful time anyway."

"Remember when you were telling me about the big party the elves had on Mesziah?"

"Sure. What about it?"

"I wonder if Aunty Rinim ever went to a party with the elves on that world. She seems to have been everywhere from the stories she tells me."

"I'm sure she has, Miri. Aunty Rinim is very old and has done many things."

"I wonder if the elves could understand what she was talking about. Nobody else does, but we like to listen to her anyway."

"Oh, I doubt they understood a word that she said. But, then they surely liked her and enjoyed hearing her talk."

Well, I'm sure glad she came to my party. It wouldn't be the same without her. And . . ." Miri's voice drifted off.

"And, and what?" Jenn asked.

"Oh, I was just wondering where Daddy is. It would have been so good if he could have been here with us."

Chapter 14

R.A.D.

Each stage of our lives is a growing experience punctuated by brief moments of pleasure and pain . . . and times of emerging awareness of our mortality and more.

08:30-15 NOAIM 8332-7N5

Twenty-one years of garrison duty on the Rim Area Defense Station changed a lot of attitudes among the pathfinders and the crew of the Yanna Jun. Past events and a sure knowledge that none of the pathfinders would ever be free to return to a G.C.C. command during their lifetime destroyed any illusions about being reassigned.

Enemy infiltrators, sparing no efforts to find out who'd kidnapped their god, discovered the identity of the seven pathfinders from top-secret G.C.C. records. Now there was a 'wanted circular' with all the details of each member, including a dozen photographs of each, distributed to all of the enemy's field agents. Their orders were to capture them alive at all costs.

The enemy agents were easily misled about the infiltration ship's identity. Council Central notified the G.C.C. that the Creigmomut Cruiser, 'Uscondel-Trob', utilizing all the latest technology, was involved in the raid. It was on record that the Uscondel-Trob was attacked and destroyed by an enemy battle cruiser three years after the raid and all hands lost when the ship's sub-binaries detonated. The enemy knew the Nashramh was involved in the capture, but had no idea whether Meseosargon was

dead or alive, or where his body was. They weren't about to give up their search.

The pathfinders dealt with their assignment on the RAD station as just another training mission. Telly and Captain Rakon worked out stringent training exercises for every day of their stay. There was no time for getting fat and lazy, and the team was on a constant alert for attack from both within the station and from outside. They took the possibility of enemy infiltrators seriously, and never let their guard down for even a moment.

During this period, Dove and Mattice were recruited into the Nashramh, after their close association with the sisters changed a number of their attitudes. Both Vuera and Moskall were also seriously considering joining but were encouraged to hold off until they were absolutely sure they wanted to make the commitment. It was also made clear that being a member of the Nashramh would in no way compromise their status in the G.C.C. Pathfinders, and they wouldn't be required to betray any confidences to that organization. The Nashramh recruiters expected a high degree of integrity from their members, and there was no exception with respect to the pathfinders.

Neferah personally sponsored Dove Konissah for membership in the order and made every effort to teach her the ropes. She, Telly and Dove were extremely close friends throughout this period, and Neferah opened all her hidden feelings and dreams to the two of them, especially to Telly, whom she loved dearly. This deep-seated love for Telly was not one-sided, and the two discussed the possibility of a binary marriage arrangement for when one, or both of them died. Neferah had never considered such a thing before, but when she was with Telly, everything changed.

Now it was time for the three friends to part, since it was suspected Meseosargon was to be moved to another site. Actually, as Admiral Drubb and the three Magums already knew, the Belial was secretly removed to another location 12 years before and this present maneuver was a ploy. No one else on the RAD station knew the facts, not even the security people overseeing the present exercise. A dummy group was moving a sealed package on an unmarked vessel to a supposedly uncharted location. Every precaution was being taken to ensure total security, and even the pathfinders were being relocated to another site.

Neferah decided to take the initiative before she and Telly were separated, and made an appointment with the Necro-Classic Authority in the Nashramh's security headquarters. She couldn't bear leaving him without making prior arrangements for their eventual binary marriage.

Neferah and her grey-uniformed escorts approached the RAD station's security section and proceeded to the inner core headquarters without speaking. Only their hard heels, clicking on the stone floor, made any sound as they marched along. She felt an odd tension as the three entered a small office. The slim, blonde-haired woman behind the stone desk appeared to be well under 100 years in age, possibly only in her 30's or 40's, but there her youth ended. Her deep grey eyes were softly glowing and seemed to be a million years old. They weren't tired eyes, but something about them had the ancient quality of both age and experience which couldn't be hidden.

"You may sit, Captain B'Tziah," she toned her words softly, lacking either friendliness or any sign of welcome.

"Thank you, my Grace," Neferah answered, feeling a chill run down her spine.

The two security guards abruptly turned and left the room, the door closing automatically behind them.

"So, you want to make a binary marriage with your young man, do you? And, to what end do you propose this bond?"

"I don't understand your question, my Grace. My request is to join together with the man I love. What other end could there be than our mutual love?"

The woman sat leaning forward with her elbows on her stone desk, her hands clasped with her long fingers interlocking, and her thumbs touching her lower lip. She sat silently for a short space of time staring unblinkingly into Neferah's eyes. Her softly glowing eyes drew Neferah's attention like a magnet, and nothing could break their spell. Neferah was so captured by this phenomenon that she couldn't remember much else about the woman after the conference was over. Only her strange, compelling, and hypnotic eyes could never be forgotten.

"Do you know where you are now, Captain B'Tziah?"

"Yes, my Grace. This is the Necro-Classic Records Section of our Nashramh's Graves Registration Group. It's my understanding

that you may advise me as to where and how I can obtain a binary marriage arrangement with my love, Telakin B'Meszhiah."

"And, why do you want to make this arrangement?"

"As I said before, I love him and he loves me."

"I have no doubt that what you say has some element of truth about it, but you haven't told me why you want to make an eternal binary arrangement with this young man. You understand this isn't something we enter into lightly, do you not?"

"Yes I do, my Grace." Neferah felt her face beginning to flush and wondered what it was this creature was getting at. What she needed in Kin was too private to be dealt with lightly.

As if reading her thoughts, the woman began to speak. "You, Sister-Captain Neferah B'Tzhiah, are not as yet a human being. You are, in fact, an untamed creature from a violent and unforgiving world wherein force and violence is the answer to most disputes. You do not as yet understand what love really is, nor are you in any way prepared for the responsibilities a binary marriage arrangement imposes upon you."

"That's not true, my Grace. I've been a loyal and trusted officer in our outer rim fleet for more than 1,000 years, and my service to our sisterhood is unquestioned."

"True, you are a loyal, although savage warrior in our naval forces. But still, that does not make you civilized nor does it make you human. Tell me, if you were to marry this young man and the two of you were reentered into a male body, who would be the primary personality operating that body?"

"Why me of course, I'm competent to lead."

"Why?"

"It's because I'm more aggressive and more experienced."

"I see. Would you have sexual relations with women in such a case?"

"God no, I wouldn't need to." What would make her ask a question like that? It certainly didn't have anything to do with her, Kin, or their binary marriage.

"Not even in a man's body?"

"No. Besides we'd have each other and no one else would be necessary."

It was becoming apparent that Neferah B'Tzhiah hadn't the slightest idea of what a true binary marriage was. It would be

necessary to probe further and discover what her responses to some delicate questions would be.

"What if he has other ideas on the matter?"

"Well, he'd have to forget them! I'm all he'll ever need."

"On your home world of Tziah, your native races feel a strong need to control one another, even if it means killing to get their way. How do you think you will control this young man if you're in a binary marriage with him? You won't be able to kill him."

"I do have a strong force of will, and he'll do my bidding one way or the other." Strangely enough, this thought had tugged at her inner consciousness although she'd never addressed it.

"You'll be in charge whether he likes it or not?"

"He will like it. I have a great deal to offer. Having sex with women isn't everything." Damn! This wasn't coming out right.

"He'll be a part of you forever and will need to express his own will as an individual and to exert some of his own will upon you. How do you plan to deal with this?"

"Obviously, I'll allow him his limits. But, there are some areas where I must rule."

"Are you aware that your young man has been living with Dove Konissah and having sex with her for the past 16 years?"

"No I haven't." Neferah felt her face flushing even more and perspiration breaking out on her forehead. She suddenly felt as if she'd been kicked in the stomach.

"Are you willing to acknowledge their relationship and share Telakin B'Meszhiah with her? Or, for that matter, will you accept any other personal relationships he may have with women in the future whether they are physical or ethereal?"

Neferah hadn't counted on an interrogation of this sort and the questions were beginning to throw her. This damned creature was revealing things she hadn't any idea were happening. This disclosure about Kin and Dove came as a total surprise. It never occurred to her that they were anything other than comrades-at-arms and friends.

"You've never had sex with him, have you?"

Neferah raised an eyebrow, then, decided to be frank with this creature. She wanted this binary marriage too much to lose it because of the creature's penchant for game playing. "No. It's not because I haven't really wanted to. But, I was hurt badly in a combat situation which makes it virtually impossible for me to be a

decent partner in bed. I do have a lot of other qualities I willingly share with him, though."

"How do you feel about him living with Dove?"

She paused. "I don't know. I never suspected they were having sex. I knew they were very close friends, and she's a close . . . a very close friend of mine. I . . . I really don't know how I feel about this . . . but it . . . it isn't good. I guess I feel betrayed. Yes, betrayed."

"Betrayed, how is that?"

"I've been a close friend and companion to both of them for 25 years now, and they never let on, or even hinted, that this thing was happening. I've given Kin all the love and affection I know how to, although I haven't been able to offer him sex. I . . . I, damn it, I couldn't give him anything more than I have and I feel cheated!"

"How do you feel cheated?"

"We talked about this binary marriage and he never said anything about Dove. He said he loved me in a special way. Maybe I was being naive, but I really thought I was special to him and was the only one he needed or wanted. I think he should have told me about this thing with Dove and not led me on. I don't know what to think about either one of them now. When he said he loved me, I believed him. Now I don't know what he really meant."

"He meant just that," the woman answered. "Telakin B'Meszhiah is capable of loving and respecting more than one woman. He's not a cheat, nor is he promiscuous. He is a human being with human needs. He loves you with a depth you can hardly understand. It's you who doesn't know how to love. You can love more than one person at the same time, but in different ways and in different kinds of relationships. That's what a binary arrangement is all about. This ability to both love and share with more than one personality is a fundamental strength of all our binary marriages."

"I don't understand."

"You want to possess, to own, and to control him. That's not love, but rather a form of enslavement. You haven't as yet revealed why you really want this binary arrangement. I don't believe you've really thought this through. You have some preconceived ideas of what you think a binary marriage is, but I'm afraid that you're sadly mistaken."

"I've already told you, my Grace, but you don't choose to understand. You're wrong about my motivations. It's true that I'm

strong-willed, but I am not what you accuse me of. I may seem to be rough around the edges to you, but I have to be as a ship's captain. I'm capable of loving and caring for another human being. I know I'm not perfect, but I also know I have a lot to offer Kin, and he's aware of it. If he and I are in agreement on this, I don't understand what the problem is. He and I want to be together for eternity, especially if we're lost out in the void."

Neferah paused, then, continued as if speaking to herself. "I don't expect anything of him that I can't give him equally. My loyalty and affection is his, and it's enough for me. Why should he seek another woman? As for Dove, I can deal with her in my own way."

"You're already a binary-two, Captain. You don't need any further arrangements to protect yourself against being lost alone in the void. There are other reasons for wanting this marriage than you're willing to admit."

"What do you mean I'm a binary-two? That's foolish. I've never had an arrangement of this kind before!"

"Oh, yes. You were definitely a binary-two long before you left your home world for the first time, and prior to joining our sisterhood. That's why you have such a vivid memory of your past incarnations. Your binary unity is a crude one, such that occurs on Tziah from time to time, but it's a true binary arrangement nonetheless. Both of your personalities are female and strong-willed. In fact, you're so much the same that you're unaware of your differences. I'm afraid Telakin B'Mesziah wouldn't be pleased by your ethereal appearance at this time. You are both still Tzian cats who're warriors and not much more."

The woman continued before Neferah could respond. "Telakin B'Mesziah has a great deal to learn about what a binary marriage really is before seeking to enter into one. Neither one of you is ready for this arrangement. Both of you need to gain a lot more experience before you can appreciate exactly what kind of gift will be given to you in the future. At this point in time neither of you has much to offer one another. In fact, you'd be prone to do damage to one another."

"I don't believe you!"

"No one asked you to believe anything, Captain B'Tziah. Your request is rejected. You may leave now."

"I didn't mean to offend you, my Grace. I apologize for my outburst, but I'm not a binary-two, and I do love Kin."

"It is clear you don't understand who or what we are in this section, Captain B'Tziah. Suffice it that we know more about you than you do. You need to grow up and learn more about your young man, Telakin, and about humanity in general. Now you are dismissed."

The door behind Neferah opened and the two security guards entered and stood behind her. She rose to her feet, saluted stiffly and started to leave. Then she stopped.

"I'll take this up with Council Central, my Grace. I do not accept your answer."

"Do as you will, Captain."

Neferah turned on her heel and left the room without looking back. She felt a slow anger building in her inner mind. The very fact that Kin was screwing that damned little traitor was more than she could swallow. After she'd introduced the filthy bitch into her sisterhood and sponsored her entry. Now this humiliation was too much!

It was bad enough to find out they were both traitors, but to have to be told about it by a total stranger was just too much. She wasn't sure if she could ever look the two of them in the face again without tearing their hearts out with her claws.

Woe to the poor soul who locked horns with Neferah as she left the sisterhood's security headquarters and made directly for her ship. The Yanna Jun was scheduled to launch from the number 56 egress tube in five hours, and she had no intention of dealing with any of the local scum from here on in. She was in a black mood and woe to the passersby who got in her way as she marched to the robo-cab ramp and requisitioned the first one in line.

It took her 45 minutes to make the trip to the Yanna Jun and once aboard, Neferah ordered her sergeant-at-arms to permit no one outside of her regular crew aboard the vessel for any reason. She was also to reject any communications that might be delivered, outside of regular fleet documents. With her orders recorded in the log, Neferah went to the bridge to check the ship's launch readiness with her first officer and navigator. Then she retired to her cabin and sat down at her desk to review various reports and inventories before authorizing the launch. She was so

damned mad she could kill that bitch, Dove, and tear into Kin like a hellcat.

Arden Ardel strode onto the ship's bridge, followed by the sergeant-at-arms who shrugged her shoulders and grinned disarmingly as they approached Neferah. There was no way she could deny a Magum access to the ship, regardless of the Captain's orders.

"So what the hell do you want, dog-breath?"

"Neferah, I know you're about to cast off shortly, but I have important personal business with you before you leave. Can we speak privately in your cabin?"

"Of all the damned . . . you . . ." she began. Pausing, she thought for a moment, trying to decide whether to throw the bastard off her ship or just to shoot him on the spot.

"This is important, Neferah. Please allow me to speak with you privately."

Having a Magum come begging for a personal audience wasn't in the normal scheme of things, so Neferah decided to relent for the moment.

"Okay. Five minutes. Not a second more."

The two walked over to her cabin behind the bridge and she closed the hatch after her.

"Okay. What do you want?"

"Sister Neferah," he spoke quickly, his soft voice sounding strange and feminine. "Time is working against us, and I must tell you much before we part. I am Arden's female component in this, our binary marriage. Before that, I was a fellow sister in our Nashramh Sisterhood for nearly half a million years."

"You were a Nashramh Sister? I don't believe it."

"I was, and I captained many of our scout destroyers and was assigned to risky and dangerous assignments during my long career. But that isn't why we've come here to speak with you. There are important things that must be revealed before you leave this station."

"Oh?"

"You must understand, Neferah that I was much like yourself for most of my conscious existence, only much more primitive and savage. I was a loyal warrior for our sisterhood and trusted without question. Nonetheless, I was neither civilized nor truly human just because I was part of our sisterhood. In fact, very few of our rim

fleet officers and crews are civilized. That's why we're as effective as a fighting force."

Somehow these comments sounded familiar and she wasn't in any mood to be lectured by this damn dog after what she'd just been through. God! How many people knew about her infatuation with Kin?

"Have you been talking to that security witch?"

"No. I'm part of a Magum personality now, and have other sources of information to draw on. Suffice it that I like you, was refused a binary arrangement with the man whom I dearly loved for the same reasons. It took more than 400,000 years to come together with him, and those were lonely, very lonely years."

"Four hundred thousand years? I'd have forgotten him in that time."

"No, Neferah, you would not. In fact, he would become an obsession with you, just as Arden was with me. Only I was lost out in the void for 250,000 years of that time. Even then, my Beriatric dreams were dominated by his image. We are together now, but I had much to learn before it could happen, and it was he who waited for me through that time."

"My god, how long ago did this happen?" Neferah began to realize that this was no mere story for the gullible. She began to look at this dog man in a different light. There was more to him than she understood.

"Ten thousand years before the Great Conflagration, after Samael-Agtren Estate was destroyed. Arden was then incarnated as a pathfinder named Ben Condon. After that mission he was brought to me where I was dying of an incurable disease and old age, and we were united in our eternal marriage."

"Ben Condon? That name has a familiar ring to it."

"Yes," Ardel's voice responded. "You heard my name many times from Miriam B'Mesziah when you first met her as a child. We were lovers before the raid on Samael Agtren and comrades during the venture."

"You were really her lover and fighting comrade? Oh my god! What a small galaxy! I don't know what to think. I do remember her speaking about Ben Condon . . . you. . . ." Then shaking her head, Neferah continued. "I remember her saying you were her first love and that you would always be special to her."

"We've come here to help you keep things in perspective, Neferah. Time and experience will strengthen you as well as allow you to grow. Don't become bitter like I allowed myself to. You will most certainly have your binary marriage if you just give yourself and Telakin a chance. You both have a lot of growing to do, but in different ways. There's nothing wrong with the feelings you have for him, but they have to be put into some sort of perspective which you're unable to do now. That won't always be the case. If something is meant to be, it will be. You both need time to mature, that's all."

"Is this really true? Do I have a chance after all?"

"Of course, you were turned down only for the time being. The real test lies on your shoulders and your ability to grow. You will prevail, my dear sister. When you two have learned more about yourselves and grown more, you'll have a great deal to offer one another when you're finally united. Believe me, my sister, I speak from experience."

"Well, it's time to go." Arden spoke out. "Your launch slot is due to open shortly."

"Just a moment, who are you? I don't even know your name."

"Oh yes you do, my dear sister. My name has always been known to you as 'Gale Robel'. I'm sure you know the story of how the Robel sub-binary drive was named after me."

"My god," how many times had she read about how the Robel Drive revolutionized sub-binary safety? It was Sister Gale Robel whose dying voice had broadcast the message as the old reactor's shield walls were breaking down and killing the ship's crews while in the sub-binary. She was the only one to bring a vessel with a ruptured shield out of the sub-binary, even while she was being cooked to death. She and everyone on board died before the ship reached temporal space, but her recorded voice told exactly what was going wrong while it was happening. She was a heroine to every Nashramh engineer who ever operated a sub-binary drive. And here she was, talking to her.

"Good-bye for now, Neferah," Arden spoke softly. "Peace be with you." As he turned to leave, he placed an envelope on her desk. "This is a private communication for your eyes only. I don't know what's in it, but I hope you read it. Peace."

Neferah walked to the airlock with Ardel and saluted him as he left the ship. Nodding to her sergeant-at-arms, she returned to the

bridge without comment and made ready to launch her vessel into the void. She would read the letter sometime, but not now. It was from Telakin, she knew, and reading it while her blood was still boiling was out of the question.

The white envelope remained where Ardel left it ever since the Yanna Jun launched out of the RAD station and proceeded on her assigned mission. Neferah didn't really want to read it for fear that Kin would condemn her hasty departure without saying good-bye. But, finally, she decided to open it and find out what he had to say.

26 NOAIM 8332-7N5

My dearest Neferah;

I'm sorry I'm unable to come to the Yanna Jun and see you off, but I've been detained by the security people. I have entrusted Arden to deliver this note to you and hope you receive it before leaving this station.

I went to the security headquarters to talk with the Necro-Classic people about our uniting in a binary marriage as we'd promised each other we would engage in. They wouldn't let me in to see anyone in authority, but chose to lock me up here for awhile. I have no idea what's going on, but Arden came and I asked him to deliver this note to you.

Although Dove and I have been together as comrades and lovers, which I'm sure you're well aware of, we both understand my feelings toward you. Dove thinks the galaxy of you and wants this union to take place between us. I'm afraid my own efforts are thus far of no avail, so I hope you will succeed where I have failed with the Necro-Classic people. I pray that we come together soon. Peace be with you, my love.

Telakin

"Oh shit!" Neferah mumbled to herself, a lump forming in her throat. "What the hell have I done?" Now she wished she'd let Kin handle the situation. She knew she'd botched it up and now they were both paying the price for it. Oh god, she missed him already and there was no way of knowing if she would ever see him again.

She reread the short note several times, her eyes stinging; then, put it back in its envelope. Then, for the first time, she broke down and cried.

Chapter 15

Nexus

The bond between human souls sharing a common cause in this ethereal-temporal experience is a fragile line tying our realms together . . . the nearly imperceptible thread of our being between life and death . . . our awareness and memory.

For Jennanine B'Meszhiah it spelled out frustration and a terrible sense of loss . . . for Meison-set, the Dualbot Witch, it spelled hope and a wonderful sense of being.

03:00-02 ELIM 8332-7N5

Mirisca was an infant when Raphael left Three-Stones Academy, 25 years ago, and she never had a chance to know him. Life at the Academy with Aunty Rinim and all the others was wonderful and both Jenn and Mirisca loved every moment of it. When her daughter was 12 years old, Jenn applied to the Nashramh personnel office for a transfer to a more rustic world, where the girl could grow up with a different sense of nature and where Jenn could pursue her career as a communications analyst. The transfer was forthcoming without any problems. The placement officer at personnel thought it was a great idea, and she had just the right assignment in mind; Momamo-Toel. This was a primitive world with a hearty population of civilized humans and considered a wonderful place to visit by nature lovers. Its rugged mountains and clear streams were beautiful beyond description, and the society was barely out of the horse and buggy stage, with the internal combustion engine being a primary source of automotive energy. The Nashramh shared some of their technology

with the planet's engineers and developed pollution-free carburizing systems for their engines and burning systems, so the atmosphere wasn't endangered by the use of fossil fuels.

The two of them made a good life for themselves on this blue-green world and enjoyed the excursions they'd taken during the years. Miri grew from a healthy, vivacious child into a sturdy young woman with a mind and will of her own. During all of those years, Jenn and Miri hadn't heard from Raphael and both were reconciled to the fact they'd never see him again in this lifetime. Jenn still missed him even though they'd only spent a short time together. She still blamed Ruby and the sisterhood for keeping them apart. She felt they would still be a family and together today if Ruby hadn't sent Raphael away.

Now Miri had graduated from the Mannerdale Art Institute and wanted to join the Nashramh as a cultural technologist. Jenn was dead set against her joining the sisterhood and going off into the void, no matter what kind of assignment it was, and risking being lost forever. No. She wanted her lovely daughter to stay with her here, on Momamo-Toel, and to be an artist.

Jenn had lost too many people whom she'd loved because of the sisterhood, and she didn't want to lose Miri, too. She still had nightmares about being lost during her previous life when she and her shipmates crashed on an uncharted world. She didn't want that to happen to her little girl and she couldn't bear to think about it. Miri, however, won her argument. She persuaded Jenn to let her go to the Nashramh summer camp to learn more about their various career programs, and then decide.

The camp bus was leaving early this morning and Jenn couldn't sleep. Her mind was crowded with memories. She'd awakened early and was gazing at her photographs of Miri, Rinim, and all of the great friends they'd made over the years. Looking at the pictures and remembering their conversations and things they did together brought tears to Jenn's eyes. She had a crystal-clear memory for past conversations, especially those between her and Miri.

They were extremely close because all they had was one another throughout the years. They had not only been mother and daughter, but were also best friends. Jenn found it hard to think that time had passed so quickly. Miri was grown up now, and making her own decisions.

Here was a bright color photograph of Miri when she was ten years old, back at Three-Stones Academy, wearing her funny summer clothes. Miri was wearing her green shorts, a sleeveless T-shirt, sandals, and a crazy plasti-flex visor bent low over her brow. It looked neat, Miri thought, and it kept the glare out of her eyes. As a matter of fact, Miri never went anywhere without it on.

She'd grown by leaps and bounds and the two of them enjoyed their time together more than ever before. They would take rides on 'Cameo Pond', especially on summer holidays. Jenn would pack a picnic lunch for the two of them, making certain there was plenty of fruit, nuts, and of course, ginmallows. They carted their little inflatable boat over to the pond and laughing, launched it into the water. Jenn was elected to row the craft while Miri sat strategically at the bow, propped up by a spare inflate-a-bag while her legs dangled over the side, cooling her toes as they skimmed over the water. Miri was pretending she was one of the 'idle rich' she'd read about at school, and her mother was her servant.

"Row a little bit slower maid, watching the water rush by gives me a great pain in my head," she sighed.

Jenn loved playing like this. She too had read the same kind of stories when she was young.

"Yes, my lady, anything your heart desires," Jenn spoke with mock humility as she paddled more slowly. "Does my lady request anything else? Some spice tea, perhaps or a biscuit maybe?"

"Oh yes, I'm in dire need of some spice tea, thank you."

"Allow me to pour it for you, my lady. Here it is."

"Ah, thank you my dear servant, thank you. What would I do without you? I tire so easily."

Giggling, Jenn resumed paddling. "I bet you tire easily you little squirt. I read the same story when I was little. I might add that you play the part well."

"So do you, Mom."

"Are you insinuating that I make a good servant?"

"Yup."

"We shall see about that, my little lady." Jenn laughed as she splashed water on Miri, "So much for being a dear servant!"

Jenn leafed through her photographs and found another with Miri holding some string between her fingers. She'd come home from school to show her mother the 'Millwick's Web'. This was the game which older children amused the younger ones with. It was

played with a string of yarn that was just under two thirds of a meter-long, and tied together at each end to make a circle.

"Hey Mom, come here and see this! It's really neat."

"Okay, what am I supposed to do?"

"Okay now, this is called the Millwick's Web. I hold both ends of the circle apart like this, and you put your hand in through the middle like this. Now I pull the string on both sides with my middle fingers, like this. Then you pull them out, like that, and before we know it we have a web! The whole idea is to keep from getting your hand caught in the web. See, isn't that neat?"

"That's a cute little web, honey. Where'd you learn to make it?"

"From some of the older girls at school, they always have neat things to teach us. Wait until I show this to Aunty Rinim! I bet I can get her hand caught in the web."

Jenn was already feeling lonely. Looking at these familiar faces and places in her photo album and seeing Miri literally growing up before her eyes was a reminder that nothing ever stayed the same. In her mind's eye she suddenly remembered being with her best friend, Miriam, back at Ling Wall Academy. It still made her to think about how they'd grown up together and had gone their separate ways. She wanted to cry when she thought about Miri leaving and maybe never coming back again, or being gone for years on end.

Turning the album's page, Jenn studied a picture of Miri and her friend, Courien. The girl was tall and heavy-set with a ruddy complexion and slow, dull-looking eyes. Her voice had a gravelly tone to it and she seemed overly shy and lacked any kind of physical grace. But, contrary to her appearance, her mind was both clear and bright and Miri told her mother that Courien was a genius. The two were the best of friends from the day they met. It was Courien who introduced Mirisca to painting and sculpture, and the two spent all their spare time on field trips for sketching and visiting art museums. Although Courien didn't have the hand to do fine drawings, she had the eye of an experienced instructor and critic. She encouraged Mirisca and showed her new techniques that played on her native talents and produced the most striking results. Now Courien had gone away to a Nashramh training facility and Jenn knew they'd never see her again. That's just the way the Nashramh was.

Jenn was sitting with her album in her lap, studying one of the pages with sketches on it, when Miri came in the kitchen and sat down next to her.

"Couldn't you sleep, Mom?"

"No."

"Can I sit here with you?"

"Uh huh."

"Is something wrong, Mom?"

"Uh huh."

"Is it because I'm going to camp this morning?"

"Yes."

"Mom, I thought we agreed that everything would be okay."

"Well it isn't. I don't want you to be up there with those damned Nashramh recruiters. They can convince Samael himself to make a career in the Nashramh!" Jenn said petulantly.

"Oh, Mom, I know what I'm doing," Miri protested.

"Sure. We all think we do. But, do you realize that once you're initiated in that organization you can never get out. You're their property forever and you have to do everything they tell you to and you can't ever say no."

"Have you ever tried to get out, Mom?" Miri looked surprised as Jenn expressed her frustrations.

"No. But no one has ever left the Nashramh except for one woman they thought was a traitor, and they hanged her and shot her soul out into the void beyond the edge of our galaxy."

"I never heard of anyone's soul being shot out beyond our galaxy," Miri spoke softly. "Who was it?"

"Someone named Sahlie Lor. Your father told me about her."

"Are you sure they actually shot her soul out into the void?"

Jenn thought for a moment. "Well, I'm not sure they actually went that far, but they did hang her and were going to do the rest, but maybe they changed their minds about it. I do know they treated her badly and were unfair to her, according to what your father said. They blamed her for all sorts of things she didn't do and when they found out she was innocent, they didn't even apologize. They just went on mistreating her. Do you want to get involved with people who treat their own sisters that way? Anyway, I don't want you getting mixed up with those recruiters at that summer camp. There is no glamour about being a traveler between the stars, Miri. It's a lonely and dangerous life with terrible

consequences when things go wrong. I'll never be able to sleep well knowing you're always in danger of being lost forever out in the void."

Miri nodded. "I accept this, but I feel I must go despite that. Besides, there are good, civilized people involved as well, like you and Auntie Rinim. Mom, I'm leaving in an hour. I won't do anything without talking to you first. I promise."

"I know," Jenn sighed. "I won't say anything more about it, but I want you to talk to me before you do anything final."

"I will, Mom." Miri hugged her lovely mother, wishing Jenn could be as excited as she was.

Miri had already dressed and eaten breakfast when the bus arrived and was ready to leave. Jenn helped her haul her duffel bag out to the waiting green bus and kissed her good-bye before she got on. Then, with tears in her eyes, she waved to the busload of young women as the vehicle drove down the street. Miri waved back with a happy smile and her face pressed up against the window by her seat and Jenn could still see her until the bus turned the corner and was gone.

Jenn slowly went back into her apartment and began to dress for work. She heard a knock on the front door.

Surprised, she answered. Two grey-uniformed security women stood there.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" Jenn recognized their Nashramh uniforms.

"Are you Sister Jennanine B'Meszhiah?" one of the women asked softly.

"Yes. Is something wrong?" Jenn's heart sped up, news about Raphael? Was he. . . .

"May we come in and speak to you for a moment?"

"Yes, but what's this about?" Jenn began to worry as she noticed a package in one of the women's hands.

The women entered the apartment and asked Jenn to sit down. The woman who'd spoken first, continued.

"Sister Jennanine, I'm very sorry to have to inform you that your daughter, Mirisca, was killed in an accident."

"You're mistaken," Jenn shook her head. "She just left here a few minutes ago on the summer camp's bus."

"Yes, but there was a collision two kilometers from here, a fuel truck struck the bus, killing all the young people. Your daughter, Mirisca, was with them. I'm afraid we must ask you to come with us and formally identify her body. We've already done so, but local law requires that the nearest of kin provide positive identification before moving the body."

Jenn felt numb as they escorted her to a waiting vehicle. This couldn't really be happening. Miri had just kissed her good-bye and was going to summer camp. There had to be some sort of mistake!

After all her worrying about Miri being lost or killed out on some distant planet, the thought of something happening to her here, so close to home, had never entered her mind. Something so simple and quick . . . here one minute, gone the next . . . no, they were wrong! There had to be some kind of mistake . . . there just had to be!

The fire had been put out, but a black haze of smoke still hung in the air as they approached the site. Jenn could see the charred skeleton of the once green bus and the gutted tank truck buckled up against it.

She was nearly in a state of complete shock when the women led her to a line of white plasti-skin bags lying on the ground. As they approached them, one of the women spoke softly. "Sister Jennanine, we don't like having to do this, but we must abide by local laws . . . I'm sorry." They then stopped at one of the bags. Jenn's stomach plummeted and she broke out in a cold sweat.

"Please try to identify this girl," a tall man in fireman's clothing said softly as one of the security women held Jenn's arm securely. He knelt down and opened one end of the long white bag and Jenn nearly fainted. The little body was charred and black, and only a few strands of scorched hair and a green circular were recognizable as was having been Miri's.

Her beautiful little Miri was gone! The only thing she had to live for was gone forever. She was alone again.

Jenn screamed and began to cry. "Oh, my god, no, my baby, Miri, my baby," then everything went black.

After returning Jenn to her apartment and making sure she was stable, the two security women left for their main headquarters. Jenn didn't go to work that day, and just sat in her easy chair and stared at one of Miri's paintings on the wall. She

thought about Miri until she couldn't stand it anymore, then she began to think about the sisterhood.

"I loved Miriam so much . . . and Raphael . . . god, our lives were so wonderful together. Until Ruby sent him away all because that old face, Iyam'i didn't accept me. Now, they coerced my lovely little Miri into their damned sisterhood and look what happens, she dies! I feel like some huge part of me is dead too." Shaking her head and holding her forehead with one hand, Jenn tried to cry, but couldn't. There were no tears, just bitterness.

Jenn never recovered from the sight of the charred remains of her lovely daughter, nor was she ever the same, and she held the Nashramh responsible for the tragedy. If not for them, and their damned recruiting of innocent young girls, her daughter would still be alive and pursuing a great career as an artist. Now she had nothing. Her husband was gone forever and her little girl was dead. Work was all she had left, and Jenn buried herself in it, staying overtime and never taking festival days off. She became a recluse for awhile, although two sisterhood counselors tried to help her. Jenn resisted all of their efforts and avoided anyone from the Nashramh except when she had to work with them. Then she only offered what was absolutely necessary and nothing more.

* * *

Raphael stood up and left the conference table without a word and walked out of the room. The terrible feelings emitted by Jenn's inner mind nearly bowled him over and he heard and felt everything that went on as she viewed the charred body of their little girl. What Jenn heard and felt, he also heard and felt through his inner consciousness. He too, wanted to cry, but couldn't. Everything that happened to Jenn weighed heavily on him, and he couldn't do a damned thing about it . . . only understand and empathize. Oh, how he wanted to be with her now.

After sitting alone for a time, he returned to the conference table and took his position just across from the old Dualbot Witch, Meison-set.

"You appear to have been hurt, my Grace. May I be of any solace to your pain?"

"No, my sister, I must deal with this alone. Peace be with you."

The old woman bowed her head and turned away. This was the first time this angel from the heavens of her own origin had

acknowledged they were truly sisters. Whatever had hurt this beloved Raphael B'Thebel was not his alone for she too could feel it in every fiber of her being. Now there was no mistaking what her mother and grandmother had told her. She and they were truly reincarnations of those off-world women who'd been stranded here so many thousands of years ago. She'd been recognized and would, along with her 34 Dualbot Sisters, return to their ancient heritage.

During his moment of terrible inner pain, Raphael was recognized by the old woman, who, he instinctively knew, felt his loss. Ruby instructed him to wait before disclosing that Meison-set and her sisters had been identified as crew members of the long missing Nashramh scout destroyer, 'SD Delaeobota-Vee'. They weren't binaries and had no extended memories of their own identities or past lives. It was by the transmittal of their memories as an oral tradition to their daughters, generation after generation that they'd been able to stay together for so long. Only when in limbo, between physical reincarnations, did they know who they were and strive to be born into female bodies produced by their own living members. If they were born outside the circle of their own kind, they wouldn't remember who or what they were and there would be no tradition to guide them. They felt in their souls that those of their kind would come from beyond the stars and take them home. When Raphael called her "sister," she knew she had truly been found.

He knew his slip of the tongue was really a blessing in disguise. It relieved him of the strain of keeping good news a secret, and it convinced Meison-set that all of her actions in supporting these two wonderful off-worlders were correct. Raphael would be forever her friend and absolutely nothing would be denied him.

The Seloset Proctorate was the leading civilized group of kingdoms on Paulota IV, the fourth planet of the TRF-2944B solar system on the seventh-arm's outer rim. Its four major kingdoms and 16 allied sub-kingdoms ruled over most of the planet's northeastern continent of Orbo-Major. Its citizens subscribed to one of several paternalistic religious doctrines which were advanced with respect to their pacific values and civilized ethical codes. Women, although considered inferior to men, were given full legal and social rights which included freedom of travel and ownership of both private and real property.

Despite their enlightened values and relatively fair legal system, there were primitive undercurrents that surfaced from time to time, and a tendency for private violence among the various classes of the lesser kingdoms, especially in the rural areas. Otherwise, the population was peaceful on the surface and moving towards a system of social contracts that would lift them into the League of G.C.C. Federated Planets within a few thousand years, providing they weren't interfered with. Now it appeared the black legions had secretly made inroads and were undermining the foundations of the Seloset civilization.

Technology on Paulota IV wasn't beyond the beginnings of the agricultural revolution, and everything was measured by the strength of men's arms and the numbers of draft animals they possessed. A man's word was his bond and the political structure semi-feudal, although the agricultural class wasn't tied to the land as in peasant cultures. Most of the Seloset's population preferred tilling the land and living in villages, rather than in towns or cities. The major urban settlements were primarily built around military and trade centers, usually at crossroads, river fords, and sheltered coastal ports. Industry as an organized economic unit really didn't exist. Military weapons, farming implements, clothing, and equipment used for transportation such as boats and wagons were made by hand by family centered guilds and a broad-based cottage craft culture. Medicine and herbal sciences were practiced by the 'Priests of the Holy Kingdom' and by a group of women known as 'Dualbot Witches'.

The appearance of strange people from the high mountains wasn't questioned generally, since popular legends paved the way for such strangers to be accepted as coming from an ancient race of magicians and witches who possessed occult knowledge and who lived for thousands of years. The Dualbot Witches spoke of having communicated with these ancient beings from times long past, and it was generally accepted that they gained their special knowledge from these ancients.

Thus, when the Ansharim began their pioneer efforts on Paulota IV, they were accepted as natural phenomena. It was speculated that the ancients of whom the Dualbot Witches spoke were actually shipwrecked space travelers. Some of their legends were surprisingly close to early Nashramh histories, and the titles, 'Lady of the Sacred Stone', and 'The Compassionate Mistress', was

used by the witches. It was also an ageless custom to only allow the sons of these Dualbot Witches to hold royal titles. Thus, the Chief of the Royal Clan of 'Set', whose name was Costwan-set, had no problem dealing with the Ansharim's agents who'd contacted his maternal grandmother, named 'Meison-set'. He had no illusions about who the Ansharim agents really were or where they'd come from, since he'd been educated into the 'Mysteries of the Ancients', by his grandmother before he assumed his title and office.

According to the sacred mysteries, the Dualbot Witches were the daughters of travelers from beyond the stars, although this knowledge was known only to those initiated into their order. It was for this reason alone they were never infiltrated by the black ones, nor were they taken seriously by the Priests of the Holy Kingdom. Their power lay in special knowledge contained in their sacred tradition, which was protected by a system of oral transmission from one generation to the next. Only the males in their line were allowed to hold titles and appear to have total power. In this way, the women were literally invisible rulers within the real power structure of Paulota IV's most civilized society, the Seloset Proctorate.

Raphael and Gabriel, his Ansharim associate, was assigned to work with Costwan-set and his advisors in military matters. They were also to establish a foundation base for their Necro-Classic Authority which would deal with colonists due to arrive on Paulota IV in 500 years. With respect to their assignment to the Seloset Proctorate, they were to act as military analysts and not interfere in the political decision-making process or local affairs.

Meison-set insisted on meeting both of them when they arrived at her grandson's outer line fortress at Forkridge, and immediately recognized them as off-worlders. Meison-set couldn't explain why, but she was drawn to Raphael, whom she kept referring to as 'high-sister' and 'my Grace'. She felt an immediate trust for him she'd never allowed to another man, not even her husband, son, or grandson. She knew he was from the stars and, as she said, "one of her kind", and nothing would be denied him. From that day forward, he and Gabriel were accepted by the entire clan as being as one with them.

Finding these enlightened women in the midst of a primitive society was quite a surprise to Raphael, and he communicated his

observations to Council Central asking that they look into the matter. He knew because of their special knowledge and wisdom, these women weren't indigenous to this planet. Who they were and where they came from was now one of his main concerns.

News of an approaching convoy of 1,000 people from an outlying garrison town, under siege for two months, reached the fortress by a mounted messenger. This convoy was guarded by only 150 of his comrades. The garrison's remaining soldiers stayed at their post to defend it against the primitive 'Mobit-con' nomads who were ravaging the entire border. A dry summer and poor hunting supposedly drove them down on the rich farmlands of the border provinces, but they were exceptionally well-led, trained, and equipped for primitive nomads. They were out-maneuvering the Seloset troops and inflicting heavy losses on them while suffering few losses themselves. The messenger asked his lord Costwan-set to provide additional protection for the refugees, since they feared the enemy was tracking them.

Costwan-set immediately assembled a mounted force to meet the column of refugees. The hastily assembled party left, with Gabriel accompanying them, and made for the high mountain pass of Tashnor-al, where the messenger reported the refugees were scheduled to enter that day. Word was left for Raphael to follow when he returned from a meeting with the Dualbot Witches. Costwan-set detailed a special guard unit of 20 men to escort Raphael, and some of his archers would meet them along the way to guide them. Thus, when Raphael returned to the fortress the next day, he was urged to leave immediately for Costwan-set's camp.

The air was cold and a crisp wind coursed down from the high mountain pass of Tashnor-al, announcing a change of seasons was near. The ground was uneven and littered with huge boulders that seemed to have been dropped into the meadows from the sky. Below, billowing layers of grey and white clouds obscured all vision of the valleys and sloping terrain beyond. Here and there were stands of dark evergreen trees, vaguely resembling pine, although no real pines were native to this planet.

Raphael and Baloue-am, his companion, walked down the winding path through the broad meadow towards a deep-green stand of trees. Their guard of 20 men surrounded them as they moved quickly down through the sloping meadow, while four of

Costwan-set's men walked out on their flanks to ensure that no enemy agents were close enough to make an attack. Costwan-set's force had swept the local area clear of the enemy's troops, although some of the hearty types could have evaded detection and remained to attempt assassinations.

It was during this clearing operation that the markers and mounds were found. Raphael was summoned to the site to witness the digging presently under way, and now he and his party approached the stand of trees where the mounds were hidden.

"Over here," Gabriel motioned as the party entered the digging site. "We've found our lost party."

Raphael nodded to the Ansharim agent as he approached the open mound where two dozen men were digging with rounded shovels. He could smell the odor of death before seeing the first corpses in the mass grave.

"From the looks of it, there are about 2,000 or more bodies here. This pit, from the size of it, and considering that the bodies are stacked six high, probably has about 500 in it. There are three mounds over there," Gabriel gestured to the south and deeper into the stand, "all measuring about the same dimensions."

"I don't see any blood. How were they killed?" Raphael noted as he leaned over the edge of the pit and studied the bloated and discolored forms.

"From what little I've been able to gather, the civilians, who were taken alive, were marched here and killed." Gabriel waved his hand towards several of the uppermost corpses. "Their hands were tied behind them and they were buried alive. We've found a few who were killed in battle, mostly soldiers and a few civilian men. The women and children seem to have all been taken alive."

"Let's have a look at the ones with wounds," Raphael spoke softly, trying to control his voice. "I want to see them close up and check those wounds."

"Over here, my Grace," Chelomer-set, the second-in-command, spoke out as he led the way. There were 15 bodies stretched out in a line behind a mound of dirt. "These were found near the bottom of the heap, just about there," he said, pointing into the pit.

Raphael knelt down next to one of the dead men and studied the cuts on his body. They were clean and well-executed thrusts. He moved to each man and checked his wounds.

"From what I can see, eight of them died from arrow wounds, probably from close range. I notice several arrows went right through their victims. The others were pulled out by the shafts except for four that were pushed through after the man was dead. See how this one's clothing is torn from the arrow being pushed through and the shaft pulled out after?" he pointed to the wounds. "Those three died of spear thrusts, this one in the back. The rest were killed by sword cuts and thrusts. There isn't any sign of slashes and tears that occur during a sustained fight. In fact, this action looks like a quick and well-planned ambush. These people don't seem to have had time to put up a real fight."

"I agree," Gabriel spoke softly. "Chelomer-set and I believe there were a number of enemy infiltrators in the group itself, and many of these people were killed by men whom they thought were friends. That's why Costwan-set has ordered the bodies dug up and identified. We know who the 150 soldiers in the guard unit were, and most of the people assigned to the group. We want to know if there were traitors among the soldiers or from known members of the group."

"I take it you're viewing each one yourself so your Council Central will have them on record." Raphael noted as a fact. "I'll do the same for my Council."

"Good. By the way, I've brought a crystal optical recorder unit with me to make on-site photos of each victim. We'll make hardcopies for identification and evaluation when we return to our headquarters."

"I understand the site was well-hidden and couldn't be located unless someone knew exactly where it was. From what I can see, it's true."

"That's right. We wouldn't have found them if there weren't a number of telltale indicators to lead us to them. It's obvious that the enemy wanted the graves to be found, although I don't think we were to find them."

"It was a set-up for another ambush, or something else?"

"Yes, something else, I think it has to do with psychological warfare. I suspect they want the Seloset Proctorate to retaliate in kind. This definitely has Belial's signature on it."

"If you're correct, we can expect more of this kind of thing in the future."

"Yes, I think we'll see it."

"How many people does Costwan-set have with him now?"

"I have 475 kras-mounted bannermen and 400 archers, my Grace," Chelomer-set answered, "also 400 archers, 50 spearmen, and 20 squires. The spearmen are digging up the graves, and the rest are patrolling our perimeter to ensure that we don't end up in those graves too."

"Good. We'd better get to work then, and record all these people and any other details we can find." Raphael turned away and walked to the open pit where men were lifting out bodies and lining them along the edge. He checked each corpse carefully, while Gabriel photographed them with his crystal optical recorder. They would have to work quickly. They had only six hours of daylight left.

It was important to keep the spearmen working so they wouldn't have time to think. They were overcome with grief and anger that could be controlled only by hard labor. None of these men ever thought of burying anyone alive, nor had they heard of the Mobit-con doing so. The real problem now was to prevent any kind of reprisals that would compound the very crime they were uncovering.

Napier-orhma stood back from his lighted chart table and spoke softly to his orderly who waited patiently behind him.

"You may leave us, and please request His Holiness, Quoli-cor, join us."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Do you intend to disclose your general strategy to him, my Lord?" Fero-ortso, his second-in-command, asked.

"Yes. The time is ripe for broadening our offensive. He will be useful to us in this phase."

Quoli-cor entered and bowed to the two blond young men who stood tall and straight as ramrods. Each acknowledged his respect with slight nods, then, turned back to the lighted map table.

"Your faithful men who infiltrated the enemy column have done well on their assignments, your Holiness. I compliment you on your most rewarding efforts."

"Praise be unto Sweet Sargon, my Lord. I shall endeavor to add more of our faithful young men to this effort so you may be served well."

Pointing to the lighted chart, Napier-orhma continued. "We will move our campaign to this area and repeat our offensive. In this

phase, your people will drug the water supply before we enter these three towns. It's important that all of their inhabitants be taken alive."

"As you will, my Lord, are there any special provisions for segregating the prisoners before moving them, sire?"

"No. They will all be tortured and mutilated before they are butchered. We want to maximize the absolute horror of their fate, and ensure that the enemy will retaliate in kind. Then both sides will be more pliable and amenable to our tactics."

"Once they're fighting among themselves and blaming each other for their problems, we'll infiltrate them in greater numbers and guide their progress." Fero-ortso added.

"Yes. That should have a good effect on them, my Lords."

"Our agents are spreading the word that the Seloset are decadent and can't protect their citizens from the Mobit-con and other brutish nomads. It will take time, but we can incite the kingdoms to initiate punitive actions against the nomads and fan the flames of protracted conflict. You will begin a new phase of religious activity beginning this next year."

"As you speak, my Lord, I shall obey without question."

"You, Quoli-cor, shall begin your campaign to become the new leader of the Holy Kingdom's priesthood, and plant the seeds of a redeemer from the very hand of God who will save all of his true believers from the terrors of this life. You will also speak against the terrible atrocities being inflicted upon the innocent by the brutes from the plains. Speak openly of them as being sub-humans and brutes that have no civilized values. You will have an ample supply of examples in the following years to meet your needs."

"Your word is my law, my Lord. Thank you for entrusting me with this most wonderful assignment. Praise be to the name of our Sweet Sargon, may he rule forever."

"If our plans go on without interference, we should be able to wrap up our campaign in about 4,000 years, but, we must always allow for the unknown and utilize every form of force and persuasion at our disposal. You will remain on this assignment for the duration of the campaign. You will be able to build a well-structured network of faithful workers to serve the wishes of our Lord, Sweet Sargon, during this period."

"Most assuredly, my Lord, four thousand years should be adequate, providing we can introduce a system of modern communications to these simple souls in that short space of time. They are really quite clever and could easily accept a reasonable level of technology within that time frame."

"Yes. And a thorough indoctrination into the loving values and promise of redemption offered by our Sweet Sargon. Your holy church and the effectiveness of your clergy will have a serious bearing on the accuracy of our timetable. Do not leave any stone unturned in your efforts, your Holiness."

"We shall succeed, my Lord. Praise be to our Sweet Sargon!"

Chapter 16

Exile

The effects of personal tragedy strike each of us differently and we may react against our best judgment . . . or just the opposite.

Meison-set and her crew acted rationally and sustained a long exile successfully . . . Jennanine B'Meszhiah didn't fare so well, except for her sentence to a life in exile.

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The morning sun was peeking through her bedroom curtains as Jenn snuggled up against her young lover and tried to go back to sleep. Lieutenant Jaromer Kroasko was only one in a line of two dozen lovers Jenn lived with for short periods of time. He was due to ship out this evening and the two had spent the weekend watching sports events and partying at the base G.C.C. Officers Club. They both had slight hangovers from too many stiff drinks and Jenn didn't look forward to facing the bright sunlight of another spring day.

Bright airy days always depressed her and made her think about things best forgotten. Her evening liaisons at the base officers' club and long workday schedules were pretty effective for keeping her mind tied up in the swirl of current events, and she wasn't as lonely as she'd been for the 10 years after her baby's death. Raphael was gone forever and she needed the company of a man, especially at night when she had so much time to think and feel her loneliness.

The officers from the naval base were a real blessing as far as she was concerned. She'd never met one who wasn't kind and

considerate at all times, and Jaromer had even proposed to marry her. What was it he'd said, last Holod evening? She thought about it as she snuggled next to him.

"Look, Jenn, I know you don't like talking about the past and whatever happened to your husband. I imagine he was a real great guy or you wouldn't have married him. But it just isn't right that you should be left here alone. My god, I know hundreds of guys who'd give up everything to have a lovely and sensitive girl like you for their wife."

"I'm all right, Jaro," she smiled. "After all, I have you."

"That's what I've been thinking about, honey. I love you like no one else in this entire galaxy, and I'm due to ship out for god knows how long. Well, I'm considering resigning my commission and staying here on Momamo-Toel and working as a civilian supply specialist. If you obtained a divorce from your husband, I'd be honored to marry you and share the rest of my life with you."

Jenn almost agreed, but her sense of proportion hadn't been lost even in her grief about her baby and husband both being gone from her life forever. This beautiful young man couldn't just give up his career for her. He had too much to lose, and even at that, she wasn't sure the Nashramh would ever consider the matter. The two talked together for the rest of the week about why this couldn't happen, and it hurt Jenn to realize that she was hurting Jaro without even wanting to. She did love him, but then she really sort of loved all of her young men . . . but not in the same way she really loved Raphael. It wasn't fair to string Jaro on, so she tried to be as honest as she could without disclosing anything about the Nashramh. He understood and reluctantly agreed to stay in the navy, but it didn't make him feel any better.

Jenn was bound to Raphael for the rest of her life. She knew that. He hadn't left her because he wanted to, but because he was ordered to. She loved him with all her heart and no one else could ever take his place. Jaro couldn't possibly know about what a binary-extended was, or how special her relationship was with Raphael and Miriam. No, she couldn't even think of divorcing Raphael, or hurting Jaro with false promises.

"Well," she thought to herself, "this is going to be our very last day together and I won't be seeing Jaro for a long time. After breakfast, I think I'll bring him back to bed and give him something to remember for awhile."

Madalean, the Comm-Sec supervisor, called Jenn into her office as two Nashramh security people stood waiting by the door. She knew Jenn was having trouble with her personal life, although it never affected her work here at the base. The little elf was such a sweet person that it upset Madalean to see her go downhill, with all of her nightly affairs with the navy people. It was no real surprise that Nashramh security was interested in the problem. They were probably going to do something about it. She hoped they could help Jenn. They'd mentioned that Jenn was a good person who needed extended counseling to help her regain her sense of balance.

Madalean wasn't aware that Jenn's conduct at the officers' club made her the butt of jokes and slurs by the club's civilian employees. The various young officers with whom she consorted weren't aware of the situation, and each man was by and large a gentleman who treated Jenn with courtesy and personal respect. She was viewed by the young men as a sweet little woman who'd been abandoned by her husband and who was a good friend and companion to have. The undercurrents from the club's employees had brought the Sisterhood's security people into the scene, although they normally didn't pry into anyone's private affairs. But Jenn's affairs were now becoming public.

Not only was her reputation in danger but also that of her sisters on the base, because gossip about her personal conduct could also be related to them. What she did reflected on them and they had enough problems with the G.C.C. The elf was in serious psychological trouble and it was time something was done about it.

As Jenn entered the office, Madalean introduced her to the two security people, then left.

"Sister Jennanine B'Meszhiah," the heavysset woman spoke out, getting right to the point. "We've been informed that you are conducting your private affairs in a manner unbecoming to yourself and to our sisterhood. You've been making a mockery of yourself by engaging in sexual liaisons with numerous young men from the G.C.C. naval contingent stationed here and have become the butt of slurs and crude humor by the club's employees. You, Sister Jennanine B'Meszhiah, are hereby ordered to discontinue all liaisons with G.C.C. naval personnel immediately, and to stay away from the officers' club. Do you understand me?"

Jenn stood at attention and looked at the security woman, now sitting behind Madalean's desk, straight in the eye.

"What I do on my own time is my business. I report to work each day and have never missed any time on the job because of my private life."

"You don't seem to understand me, Sister B'Meszhiah. You're being ordered to discontinue this practice immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand. Now you try to understand this. You've taken my husband away from me, and I'll probably never see him again. And you've taken my only daughter and destroyed her. I have nothing left but my job. Those men I date are the only ones who give a damn about me, and they give me a little bit of happiness and relieve my loneliness. This is my body and I can do anything I want with. . . ."

"Therein you are wrong!" the security woman interjected. "You're a member of our sisterhood and subject to our laws and our legal orders. Do I make myself clear?"

"But, I'm not doing. . . ."

"You are being given a direct order, Sister B'Meszhiah! Do you understand?"

"Yes!" Jenn answered, clenching her jaw.

Jenn went back to work still unconvinced, even after the woman read her the riot act. That evening, after eating dinner alone, she went to the officers' club and sat at her accustomed table. Lieutenant Hanrik Jenorce, one of her friends and occasional lover, sat down with her. The two spent the early evening together, dancing and sharing some small talk. After a while they decided to go to Jenn's apartment and to spend the night together. They were in the hall, walking to her front door, when two plainclothes security women appeared as if out of thin air.

"You will come with us, Sister B'Meszhiah," the taller of the two ordered in a hoarse voice as she took hold of Jenn's arm.

"Hey! Who the hell are you?" Hanrik demanded as he tried to free Jenn from the woman's hold. Without warning, the shorter woman spun him around and struck him in the solar plexus. As he doubled up, she hit him twice in the face before he fell to the floor.

The tall woman pushed Jenn against the wall so hard she saw stars. As she regained her senses, Jenn realized that her wrists

were secured by a tough plastic strap and she was being led out of the building and pushed into a waiting car.

Hanrik was taken out to the curb and a cab called for him. The short security woman, who'd just decked him, apologized and informed him that he was interfering with sisterhood security business and could be jailed for it. But, as he didn't know what the issue was, they were sending him back to his base without pressing charges.

"So you don't believe in obeying lawful orders, Sister B'Meszhiah? Well, we have an answer for that." The heavy-set woman spoke so softly Jenn had to strain to hear.

"Damn you!" Jenn cried. "You don't own me. I wasn't hurting anybody."

"We shall see about that. You're under arrest for directly disobeying a lawful order. Do you understand?"

"What I do on my own time is my private business!"

"Do you think you can disobey a lawful order, yes or no?"

"I know that you think you can order me around, but I have my. . . ."

"Is it yes, or no?"

"Yes!" Jenn finally cried out. "But, I have my side. . . ."

"You have no side on this issue, Sister B'Meszhiah. You've knowingly and willfully disobeyed a lawful order and are subject to our laws concerning such matters. You don't belong to our sisterhood only when you choose to. You are one of us all the time. How you conduct yourself reflects on all of us and we will not stand idly by while you make a fool of yourself at our expense. Do I make myself clear? You will be spending the next five years in isolation, thinking about what we mean when we give a direct order."

"Don't I get a trial or something?" Jenn chirped, realizing the woman was serious. "I should have a hearing of some kind."

Jenn realized she was in over her head and should have listened to what she'd been told earlier. In all honesty, she didn't think they would take any action and were just sticking their noses in her private business much as they'd done in the past with Raphael and Mirisca. It dawned on her that she'd misjudged the situation and now she was afraid she couldn't get out of it. She hoped they wouldn't beat her up or anything like that.

"Not in this case. You were given a direct order by me this morning, and made a personal point of disobeying it. This is your trial, and the minutes of this meeting will be reviewed by someone at Council Central. Until we're given other instructions as to where you'll be sent, you will be living in a jail cell. That is all."

Jenn was taken out of the office and led down a long hall to a guard room. She was stripped of her clothing and searched for weapons so thoroughly she felt like a hardened criminal, and then she was locked in a jail cell. Three days later she was transferred to another facility where she was again stripped and searched before being placed in a large cell that had rather nice furniture in it. Jenn would spend the next five years in this room and only be allowed to leave it once a day to exercise alone in an open court. From this point on, her life was the same.

* * *

Checking the coordinates on his map, Raphael searched the valley below for any directional markers or natural points of reference. Finding none, he picked a flat meadow near the base of the pass as their rendezvous point and passed the instructions on to Baloue-am by messenger. The allied town, B-426 on his chart, was somewhere to the south of the pass and located among large stands of trees near one of the long valley's many streams. Unfortunately, the entire valley was covered by stands of dark trees punctuated here and there by rolling green meadows. There was no sign of telltale smoke from hearth fires to indicate where the town was, so they'd have to search the area without inviting an attack from their erstwhile allies, the Tala-tu hill tradesmen.

While he waited for Baloue-am's reply, Raphael sat back and let his mind wander while he rested his overworked body. He felt frustrated and sorry for Jenn, who'd succumbed to her emerging human frailties and needed the company of strange men to ease her loneliness. He had no illusions about her feelings and knew that the young G.C.C. officers were kind and considerate to her. At least they were giving her some of the comfort and companionship that he couldn't.

He realized she was reacting to the terrible pressures of human experience, just as Neftalak had long before, and he wished he could help her. Jenn wasn't disloyal to him, and he knew how much she loved and wanted him, but the realities that were

destroying her perspective were harsh and unrelenting. She had nowhere else to turn for personal affection and was caught up in a no-win situation. Neftalak turned to other women, and now Jenn turned to other men for many of the same reasons. He didn't like what was happening to her, but he certainly understood it, and loved Jenn more because of her emerging humanity.

When she disobeyed the security people's direct orders and was arrested, he was ready to demand that he be returned to the sixth-arm to provide for her defense. It was inconceivable that the sisterhood would put little Jenn in prison. Rinim Poodor entered the picture and saved his sanity by telling him about what was really happening. Jenn was now in protective isolation where she could be counseled and helped to heal from her terrible heartbreak from losing Mirisca. Council Central realized that she'd suffered a nervous breakdown and never really recovered from it. Now she was being prepared for something better to save her from the loneliness and frustrations of human exile.

"Trust me, Raphael," Rinim implored him, "I'll do the right thing for our wonderful little elf. However, she can't know we're giving her a gift. It would all backfire if she did. Please trust me."

He'd agreed and withheld his questions. Rinim was always up front and fair about everything. There was no question she'd do well by Jenn. Now he could perceive Jenn's slowly changing feelings and the easing of her frustrations as she went through her daily routines in her private room at the security section's medical facility. She actually thought she was in jail.

The messenger returned with Baloue-am's reply. Raphael signaled his group to mount up and move down into the valley.

Baloue-am's men were ashen-faced and their eyes glowed with a terrible anger that threatened to explode into uncontrolled violence. Raphael dismounted and followed a spearman along a narrow path into the wooded grove. The big man spoke slowly and nearly inaudibly as they walked, obviously trying to keep his strained emotions under control.

"These here people are good-uns and live right peaceable in this here forest. I know some of them and, damned to hell, there aren't no justice here. We got to avenge them poor souls."

Raphael walked beside the spearman and nodded. It was obvious there'd been another massacre and God only knew what else. He hated having to witness the wholesale slaughter of these

innocent people and to try to control his allies from acting against their enemies in kind.

The town consisted of about 700 various buildings. It sprawled in and among tall evergreen trees which bordered a wide stream flowing down to the larger Tristo-am River. A smell of death hung in the air like dense fog, and Raphael knew that no one survived the slaughter.

"Over here, my Grace," Baloue-am motioned as he rounded the corner of a large wooden building. "They're increasing the level of their filthy atrocities. Now they're raping women and children and mutilating their bodies."

There were stakes driven into the ground with hundreds of men, women, and children impaled on them. It was obvious from the positions of their bodies that they'd been alive when impaled on the stakes. Many were gutted, and their arms and legs hacked off, while they writhed in horrible pain. All of the men had been castrated. It was a grisly sight. Inside many of the houses, women and children were laying in their own blood, having first been raped and then tortured before being killed. It was all staged to ensure that whoever found them would react with vengeance. This affair was thought out and executed with brutal precision, even the rapes, as if the enemy soldiers were trained in advance as to what they were to do. The enemy commander, whoever he was, knew exactly what he was doing, and Raphael knew that this was only the beginning.

"Them priests is right!" one of the troops growled. "Them damned nomads is brutal and got no souls. We got to do something, we got to. . . ."

Baloue-am nodded. "We will, Sidor-am, but on our own terms, do you hear?"

"I know . . . we don't want to be like them-uns, but we got to do something. . . ."

"Our problem isn't the nomadic tribes," Raphael noted to Baloue-am. "It's discovering who their leaders are, and where they have their headquarters."

"Yes, my Grace. We don't know their names yet, but we do know who they are," Baloue-am whispered, almost to himself. "We will find them in time . . . yes, in time."

Meison-set sat silently watching as Raphael adjusted the red crystal lens in front of the child's right eye and then peered

through it. This was the last of her 34 sisters to be tested, and all were verified to be from the original group of survivors, as related in their tradition. What he was looking at, she could only guess, and she suspected it was the little girl's very soul.

Raphael studied the child's retina and saw only the cones, rods, and delicate system of blood vessels visible to any optical instrument. There wasn't anything else to see. Then he whispered softly in an ancient Nashramh dialect, so only the child could hear.

"Hear O'Women of Compassionate Justice. The Eternal our Creator, the Eternal is one."

Within the structure of the retina itself, a white mist appeared on the surface and slowly crystallized, allowing him to see past it and along the optic nerve into her brain. A delicate and lightly shimmering image came into focus, and Raphael could see her face as clearly as if it were etched on his own consciousness. A voice from someone at Council Central passed his lips as he whispered words to the child in the ancient tongue.

"We know you, our beloved sister, Chuan HaLie, and you will now come home to us. Trust this man who is one of our own, and remember who you are."

There were tears in the little girl's eyes as she threw her arms around Raphael's neck and cried. She'd finally been found and remembered who she really was!

Later, Meison-set asked Raphael what the fate of her son, and the sons of her other sisters would be. They weren't from the stars, but had shared in the women's exile. He smiled and told her something about Nashramh justice.

"Your son, the sons and husbands of your sisters, and those who've been uplifted by your influence and by the knowledge of your tradition are part of this world and belong to it. We will place a mark on their souls so they will never be lost, and we will treat them as our own. All of them owe this world their loyalty and the benefit of their skills and humane knowledge. Therefore, we will begin by making them a real part of our Necro-Classic Authority which will enable them to help our colonists, who are coming from the stars to work to save this planet from Belial's Legions of Light. In time, they'll be the leaders who will bring their world's citizens into the League of G.C.C. Confederated Planets, and will all be true allies of our Nashramh Sisterhood. These are all good men whom we will be a benefit to in many wonderful ways. Fear you not for

their safety, my sister, for they are sturdy souls who will win this terrible battle against Belial's forces and be a boon to their world's future."

Meison-set was finally at peace with herself and happy that she and her sisters could leave this lovely world with clear consciences. They'd learned to love this world and were a part of it for a long time even though there was no choice. They'd done their best to make contributions to the society they lived in, and come to identify with these primitive humans as they learned their ways.

She felt good about leaving; now it was apparent that the sisterhood and their allies would remain involved. The promise that they would one day become a part of the G.C.C. Confederated Planets was reassuring. They'd all be leaving within the coming year and returning to their sisterhood after nearly 80,000 years of lonely exile. Tears filled her eyes as she thought about all of the wonderful men and women she was leaving here, but she so desperately wanted to go home. Now, at last, she could.

* * *

During her entire five-year confinement, Jenn was instructed and lectured on different aspects of the Nashramh and its mission to defend humankind against Belial's Legions of Light. She saw no other living human beings, only images on her mirror screen. Whenever anyone else was using the court outside, the window glass became opaque and wouldn't allow her to see who was out there. In this way, each detainee's identity remained private. None could identify the others when they were released.

This was a funny sort of prison, and she didn't really feel like she was being punished. The men and women who lectured her over the mirror screen were all friendly, polite, and reassuring in their manners and attitudes. They always referred to her as Sister Jenn, or when the subjects were light-hearted, they smiled and called her Jenn.

All in all, the time spent here had not been that bad; in fact, she settled in and decided to make the most of it since she really had no choice. When and if she was released, she would be more careful about her actions so the sisterhood couldn't find any fault with her. The only part of her confinement she didn't like was all the time she had to reflect on her past. The security people brought her photo albums to her room and left them on her bed

before she arrived. In a way they gave her comfort, but as time wore on, she realized that those happy days were gone forever.

Five years to the day of her confinement, Jenn was released from her private isolation room and ushered to an office somewhere else in the facility. She was surprised when she came face-to-face with an old friend, who sat behind a desk: Rinim Poodor.

"Well Jenn, I see you're healthy and haven't lost any weight," Rinim toned. "Do you understand why you've been incarcerated here?"

"Yes, my Grace," Jenn whispered, lowering her eyes. "I will never disobey an order again. I'll do whatever they want me to, and even fight in their war if they want."

"And, who are they?" Rinim asked.

"The sisterhood, you know . . . the Nashramh." Jenn looked up at Rinim and noticed that she wasn't quite the same as before. She had an air of authority and something else Jenn found overwhelming.

She realized the woman sitting across from her wasn't Aunty Rinim anymore but someone different, someone with a feeling of age and power. There was no sense of humor but a sternness she'd never seen in Rinim before.

"Aren't you a part of our Nashramh Sisterhood, Jenn?"

"Well yes, but I don't mean that, my Grace," Jenn began to stammer. "It's just that they want to control everything I do and . . ." she paused, then, stopped, not knowing what else to say.

"I see," Rinim nodded. "You really don't understand at all." Jenn still missed the point. She still viewed the sisterhood as completely separate from her own reality and didn't consider herself as one with it.

Rinim studied the little elf for a long time, then, began to speak as if she were a stranger.

"I understand more about your problem than you might think, Jenn. I am therefore going to pass a judgment on you that will be binding for the remainder of your life and beyond. But, first I want you to know something very important to you. After your little girl, Mirisca, was killed in that terrible accident, we recovered her gamma-complex. She will be reentered into another body in the near future, but her name will always remain as Mirisca and she will always consider herself to be Raphael's and your daughter. She has been, and will always be, a member of our sacred

sisterhood, Jenn. She'd been hurt beyond description in times past, and only your love and wonderful presence as her mother helped her forget her terrible past long enough to truly be a happy and vivacious child. She will never forget what you've done for her, Jenn. I've talked to her and she loves you very much, and I know you feel the same about her."

Jenn's mouth was hanging open with surprise. She'd never thought about it before, although she should have. After all, they'd found her and given her a chance to live again. Now she was confused and relieved at the same time. Her beautiful little daughter hadn't been lost forever and would be born into a new body. She could still see her once beautiful Mirisca lying on that road, burned beyond recognition. Oh god . . . she had nightmares about that horrible day. Now she knew Miri would be born into a new body again. Maybe if things worked out in the future, they would be able to see each other and share their lives again. Oh, how wonderful that would be! Could the Nashramh people really do this? Tears started to form at the edges of her eyes as she began to wonder what the Nashramh really was.

Rinim continued. "This is my judgment and the sentence which I place upon you, Sister Jennanine B'Mesziah. Since you do not as yet understand the reasons for our being, and the responsibilities incumbent upon all of our sisters, including yourself, I have determined that you are not fit to serve with us. You are to be separated from our sisterhood immediately and transported to a place of our choosing, where you will remain for the rest of your days. This is my judgment and there is no recourse to higher authority in this matter. May you go in peace, Jenn, and may you learn from your exile."

Jenn wanted so badly to ask about Mirisca and Raphael. She knew that Rinim, being a Magum, could communicate with him and knew where he was. Somehow she knew Rinim wouldn't answer her questions, the interview was over and her fate sealed forever.

With this, the security guard standing behind Jenn took her gently by the arm and led her out of the room. She was completely speechless and didn't even have a chance to apologize or to say good-bye to Rinim. For the first time in her life, she didn't break out in tears. She just felt numb and so very alone.

Her voyage took more than two years. Jenn was first shuttled on a Nashramh scout freighter, then a G.C.C. passenger vessel, and finally on a Nashramh scout destroyer before reaching her final destination. Now she sat alone in her own private suite of rooms, usually used by G.C.C. pathfinder teams, and waited until she was called for debarkation. She wasn't shunned by the crew, but they kept a polite distance from her, only speaking about superficial matters and inviting her to their entertainments and other diversions. Otherwise, they had their jobs to do and treated her like a civilian passenger who wasn't part of the Nashramh Sisterhood.

One of the ship's Class I fighter-lifeboats took her down to the planet's surface, landing at a spaceport high up in the mountains. She couldn't see much because of the dense white clouds, but the air had a clean odor to it. She immediately transferred to a four-passenger lighter that whisked away from the spaceport and down the east side of the mountains. The landscape below was covered by green forests which broke into grasslands, and later into another dense forest region. The lighter suddenly came to a stop and hovered above an earthen mound, then landed on the soft ground. All she was allowed to carry with her now was a knapsack containing spare underwear and her photo albums.

"This is where you get out," the security guard accompanying her said. "Peace be with you."

With that, Jenn was ushered out of the lighter craft which immediately took off and departed. Now she stood alone on top of the earthen mound, which had a long flight of stairs leading down its side. She had no idea where she was, or what she was going to do. She couldn't imagine why Rinim would have her dropped out in the middle of nowhere and left to starve to death or be killed by hostile natives.

She figured this was what was meant when they talked about being in exile. This was how she'd be punished, and with her rotten luck, she'd probably run into a Mnemex that would eat her up once and for all. Oh, well, what did it matter anyway? She had nothing to live for.

Not knowing what else to do, Jenn hefted her knapsack over her shoulder and climbed down the steep flight of stairs which was overgrown with leafy plants. At the bottom, she came to a lovely flowering plant that looked something like a red rose bush without

thorns. There was a tiny glowing creature sitting on one of the moist red flowers.

"Hello. My name is Neff," the diminutive winged being chirped happily. "Who are you?"

Jenn stopped and looked at the beautiful creature, who appeared to be a young girl with fine gossamer wings and a soft flowing gown.

"My name is Jenn," she said with a sense of wonder. "It's actually Jennanine, but my friends call me Jenn."

"Did you come from the stars, Jenn?"

"Well, yes, I did in a way. You see, I came from another world."

"Oh my, that's wonderful!" Neff chirped happily. "You must have all kinds of fabulous stories to tell. I must introduce you to my friends. Now, you must stay here and wait for me. Oh yes, I'll bring my friends. Oh my, yes, oh yes indeed!"

The little creature suddenly flew off without another word. Jenn, not knowing what else to do, figured that she might as well wait for Neff; at least she was somebody friendly to talk to. If she wandered off, Jenn feared her new-found friend might not find her again.

Jenn sat on the bottom stair of the mound and waited. Within a short time, Neff returned with several brightly dressed elves carrying three large bags.

"You see," she chirped, "this is Jenn and she's come all the way from the stars, and she knows all sorts of great and ever so wonderful stories. Oh my, yes. She does, and she even has a thinking cap on."

Jenn couldn't quite figure out what Neff was talking about as she touched the top of her beanie. It was just part of her uniform. She couldn't think much better whether she had it on or not.

The elves looked at Jenn, then at one another. They began whispering and gesturing wildly at the black beanie cap on her head.

Jenn remembered Miriam telling her about thinking caps long ago. Then she began to wonder just where it was she'd just landed.

"What world are we on?" she asked Neff. "I don't really know where I am."

"World," Neff giggled. "This is Mesziah, the most wonderful world there is!"

Neff's little elfin friends all continued to whisper earnestly to one another, now apparently in some sort of agreement.

Jenn felt a bit out of place, like a third wheel. The elves kept looking at her and whispering to each other, then giggled. She wasn't sure if she was the point of the giggles, or not. She did, however, recognize the language.

"How is it you speak Galactic Common, Neff?"

"Oh dear me," Neff giggled, "I am not human like you are, and I can speak many languages. But here, we speak Meszian." She spoke the last statement in the local dialect which Jenn was surprised to find she understood.

Jenn stood for a long time, her mouth parted a bit, frowning with curiosity and a sense of amazement. "Can this all be true?" she thought to herself. "Am I on my home world of Mesziah, the place I've always heard about but never remembered? How is it that I'm being punished? This is a wonderful place with kind and happy people . . . yes that's what Miriam said. This isn't the kind of place where people are exiled."

"Well, Jenn, as you can see we brought plenty of food to eat, and good stuff to drink, not to mention instruments for making music."

"Umm," one of the brightly dressed elves proclaimed. "It seems to me that this is a wonderful time to have a party! After all, it's not every day a Jenn comes down to our world from the stars!"

All were in agreement, so the party commenced. As the day wore on, Jenn began to remember the Meszian basic Miriam taught her a long time ago at Ling Wall Academy. The elves sat with their mouths hanging open, listening to everything she said, never tiring of hearing the same thing over and over again. Other elves began to show up and join in the fun, and each bringing extra food and drink.

Pretty soon a good time was being had by one and all. Everyone sang and danced, having a merry time. If this was being in exile, it didn't seem like punishment to Jenn.

As she sat watching these happy people, chattering, dancing and making merry, something clicked in Jenn's inner mind. Sometime, a long, long time ago, although she couldn't remember when, she remembered being at a very special party. She thought it was a wedding party, but she couldn't be sure. An ever so handsome man handed her a juicy piece of fruit from a table

because she was too small to reach it. It was here on Mesziah! She knew she'd been here long ago, but she couldn't remember when.

Neff even thought of a place for Jenn to live, since everybody had to have a place to live.

"Jenn," she chirped, "there's an ancient cottage where an old man used to live a long time ago. He was a wise and learned man who could think and answer all sorts of questions, and he had a thinking cap just like yours. You will have to live in that cottage because it's a wonderful place for thinking! You will be ever so happy there, Jenn, I know! We'll come and visit you every day and bring you good things to eat and drink. You must tell us all your wonderful stories about far-off worlds and we'll tell lots of fun stories about our world. Oh, won't this be wonderful? Oh yes, oh yes indeed!"

The elves all agreed that this was just the place for her to live and they insisted on making the trek to the cottage the following morning. That night, everybody slept under nearby bushes on the soft warm ground. Tomorrow would be a great day for a long trip and another party and everyone wanted to be fresh and ready.

Jenn went to sleep under the trees feeling happy for the first time in many years. She knew she was at home with real friends and remaining here the rest of her life would be just wonderful. This was such a happy place and she so wanted to be happy again.

Chapter 17

Promise

We do not make promises lightly, nor do we toy with our sister's intimate lives, although some may think so. Suffice it to say, we take our business seriously and always keep our promises . . . no matter how long it may take. . . .

12:33-08 TALUM 8393-7N5

The 753-meter-long SD Yanna Jun-Lal lay still in the void, only her cloaking system operating at full intensity, and waited for the enemy to arrive. She was fully armed with 1,000 MK-60V Magna-Therm long-range torpedoes, 1,500 MK-26D Magna-Therm seeker mines equipped with Bartlet MK-4 wave scramblers, ten MK-8-03 Sub-Spec laser generators, and two modified SRAN generators. All of her ordnance was the latest design, much of which was copied and improved upon from captured enemy equipment. The SRAN generators were superior to the enemy's protective shields, although designed along similar lines. Every system was shut down except essential life-support equipment, the main gridscreen, and CIC AIE-listening devices. The scout destroyer was 162 light years beyond the outer rim of the seventh-arm, waiting for a fight.

Neferah B'Tziah sat back, watching the gridscreen as the seconds ticked by. She was old and past retirement age by 50 years, but refused to step down from her command. Now she had orders to report to RAD Station B4066D for a desk job, and then to be gracefully retired from active service. "Well," she thought to herself, "orders are orders. I guess it's all over for me. But, then

there's always time for one more little fight to cap things off. What the hell."

In the old days, before the Conflagration, Nashramh warships never started a fight. It was Council Central's policy to never start anything, only to finish it once open hostilities had begun. Now a new generation of planners and fleet officers had taken over, along with a wide range of new and effective weapons at their command to combat the black intruders. It was their turn to hunt the enemy and attack him without warning or mercy. This was the name of the game: search and destroy! Neferah loved the heat of battle, and the chance to avenge the millions of her sisters lost to the black enemy during the Conflagration. Yes, she and her kind would reap vengeance on the sons-of-bitches until they cleared the Starset Galaxy of the filthy creatures.

A faint blip appeared on the side of the gridscreen and everyone knew what it indicated. A black warship was emerging from the sub-binary and would soon be their victim.

Purring to herself, the old woman thought of her true love and wished he could be here with her. "God," she thought to herself. "Kin would be in Grompt heaven if he could be in on this one. Well, I dedicate this kill to you, my love."

This was her last assignment as a ship's captain in this lifetime. If Admiralty was going to retire her, she would go out with a bang, not a whimper. "One last fight before this old cat gives up her command," she thought to herself.

At first there was a shimmering disturbance in the side of the screen. Then, the great snout of a black cruiser began to emerge into temporal space, like a huge whale rising out of a dark ocean. Immediately, as he broke into the open, the enemy began extending his defensive shields, making his vessel even more visible to the naked eye.

"On my mark, activate all systems," Neferah barked, "five, four, three, two, one . . . mark!"

Within seconds, the main drives and gravity plate came into full operation. Neferah pressed her drive throttle forward to maximum impulse speed.

"Gunnery sections, fire at will!"

The scout destroyer shot straight for the fully emerged enemy battle cruiser, cutting through his defensive shields as if they didn't exist. Neferah could see gashes appearing in the enemy's

hull as her own ship's laser batteries waved back and forth, inflicting as much damage as possible.

"Release mines by a number two spread . . . sequence of 100 per pass," she ordered into her comm-link as she brought her ship to within 20 meters of the enemy's hull.

Sharp snapping sounds recoiled through the speeding warship as salvos of small, powerful Magna-Therm mines shot out from their side-mounted batteries. They detonated only a few kilometers behind the attacking destroyer.

Neferah made 12 passes around the enemy warship, which measured 150 kilometers by 90 kilometers, blowing terrible gaping holes in his black hull. Each time she pulled up from a pass, her torpedo sections released 60 Mag-T torpedo canisters, aimed at the enemy's magazines and primary drive section. These not only tore into the enemy vessel, but disrupted his defensive fire.

Pulling up and away from her last pass at the burning battle cruiser, Neferah saw gigantic explosions all along the huge black hull. Unfortunately they weren't the kind of detonations that would blow the damned thing apart. The enemy's gunners fired wildly out into the void in a vain attempt to destroy their invisible assailant, but they'd responded with too little, too late, to have even a remote chance of scoring a hit.

Shaking her head, Neferah ordered the drive engineers to prepare to drop into the sub-binary and gave the helm and navigator permission to take over control. The entire attack was accomplished with their cloaking screen extended and the enemy never had a track on them.

Neferah was disturbed because she'd only crippled the enemy warship. But, this was the first fight she'd ever engaged in where her ship sustained no damage and none of her crew suffered any wounds. For that she was thankful.

"Well, dear Kin," she purred to herself. "That was for you, my love."

Neferah lay back on the couch and quietly studied the blank white ceiling above her. She'd been ordered to report to Council Central at Three-Stones Academy without an explanation. Her health was failing, and her eyes didn't focus as sharply as they had a year ago. It was obvious she wasn't being assigned to any kind of mission, since her days were numbered. She could feel it. She

could feel her body giving out, and the endurance that marked her younger years was no longer there. The angel of death was near at hand and she could feel his cold breath on the back of her neck.

Neferah was now as ready to die as she would ever be. She had her memories of Kin, and her only regret was not being able to see him again in this lifetime, especially since their future together had never been resolved. Now she was told to lie on this couch, alone in a little room at Council Central's headquarters. It didn't make sense, but orders were orders.

The sensation was like waking up and opening her eyes for the first time. Neferah suddenly realized she wasn't incarnate and wondered if she'd just died without knowing it. Was it like this to be lost out in the void, without a body, drifting endlessly through time and space?

The woman was strangely beautiful although her appearance was archaic in a sense Neferah couldn't put her finger on. She sat behind a dark wooden desk that was waxed and polished, and her hair was pulled up in an unfamiliar fashion. Her eyes, though, were definitely those of a Magum.

"Welcome, my young sister, I've waited a long time to meet you personally. In case you don't know who I am, my name is Ruby, and you and I share a dear friend, Miriam B'Mesziah."

"I'm honored, my Grace. I . . . I had no idea that I'd been brought here to speak with you. And, yes, Miriam was, and is, one of my best friends, although I haven't encountered her since before the Great Conflagration."

"Yes, I know this. But the reason for your being brought to visit with me has nothing to do with Miriam. I'm aware that you petitioned to have a binary marriage between yourself and Telakin B'Mesziah approved at Admiralty headquarters and previously at the Necro-Classic Authority at the RAD station where you and your young man were stationed together. You have also made a request for a hearing from our Council Central on the matter."

"Yes I have, my Grace." Neferah suddenly realized why it was she'd been brought here, and found it difficult to hide her surprise. So many years had passed since she made her last request that she'd nearly forgotten about it. She'd thought Council Central rejected the idea and was ignoring her. This was indeed a surprise.

"I will not mince my words with you, my dear Sister Neferah. Our Necro-Classic Authority at the RAD station gave you our firm

answer before you left there. Our answer has not changed, nor our reasons for declining your request."

"Is there nothing that I can say or do to persuade you to allow this marriage between myself and Telakin, my Grace?"

"Neferah, you spoke with Arden Ardel and, through his voice, Sister Gale Robel before you left the RAD station. Sister Robel told you of her own experience and why she was denied her dream for so long, did she not?"

"Yes, she did, my Grace."

"It is for the same reason we must deny you the same request, my dear sister. You are a good and loyal sister in our order, and there's no question about your integrity. It is because you aren't experienced in truly human values and ethics that we cannot allow this union. You'd be at odds with your parts and couldn't grow because of this internal conflict. You have much to learn in the centuries to come, that which all of us must learn." Ruby seemed to pause for effect, then, continued.

"You have trouble dealing with people on a personal level. If you don't like someone, for the most part you can just walk away and have nothing to do with that person. But, what's going to happen when you're joined together with other personalities you can't always get along with? You certainly can't walk away from them because they'll always be with you night and day throughout eternity. What do you do then? In the ethereal, you must deal with others just as you do in the temporal universe. That's why it's going to take time for you to form a binary marriage with Telakin. You must learn to handle relationships with living human beings before you can do so in the ethereal, being a binary means that your parts and his parts must work together as a unit for the good of all. You cannot be at odds with one another and hope to survive. You can't just love a physical man in the temporal universe but must also respect his very humanity in all its complexity."

"I don't know what to say, my Grace. I so love Kin. I don't know how to express it, but my love isn't just physical. Something about him makes me feel whole. I know I'm overly possessive and vindictive, but I can learn to control this."

"You've just stated our case, my dear sister. You'll have time to learn to control this inherent behavior over a long period of time wherein you will become more than you are now in both quality

and experience." Ruby spoke softly, but with a force that filled Neferah's conscious mind.

"Now, hear you this, Sister Neferah B'Tziah, we will place a mark on your soul that shall endure for eternity and shall make you a binary-extended with Telakin B'Meszhiah. We have already placed the mark on his soul, at his request, and the two of you will be joined by the golden thread this mark represents. But, know you this he will be united in a binary marriage with another woman before you two can come together in a true unity. Therein you will both be binary-two personalities and be on equal terms with one another. Know you this also. You are made of better qualities than many of our other sisters who have made successful marriages in the past, and it is not inconceivable that you and your love will come together within the next thousand years. Much of this will depend on you and your own progress. Don't deceive yourself and try to act as if you're a civilized human being. You must learn this art of being civilized over a period of costly experience. We will try to direct your efforts as best we can. You may be able to deceive yourself and others, but you cannot fool us. We'll know when you're ready to join together with Telakin. Until then, you must wait, learn from your new experiences, and mature as a human being. Do you accept our terms?"

"Yes, my Grace. I accept them without reservation. I thank you for dealing compassionately with me, for I know it's truly compassion and justice that rules and I believe I've learned much from you already."

Ruby smiled, almost to herself. "You wondered about Sister Gale Robel and Arden Ardel's ancient past and how they, although belonging to different orders, could come together in a binary marriage, did you not?"

"Yes, I did, my Grace."

"Well, let us have a secret between us then. Arden Ardel is my only son, who was born out of a true love between me, and my love Jared, who is now a part of me in our eternal binary marriage. You shall encounter him many times in the future and I hope you will grow to love and respect one another."

"I already respect him, my Grace. He's done well for me and everyone who's ever had contact with him. He came to me during my darkest hour and consoled me with both the truth and words

of encouragement that came from his heart. Oh, I do truly respect that man and all of his parts."

"Then, my dear sister, let us part also as true friends. And remember, you will never be alone from now on, for although you cannot feel his presence, you are now tied irrevocably to your love, Telakin B'Meszhiah, by a golden thread that will endure through all of eternity. Think well about what we've said here and accept those who would love you dearly for what you are, peace-be-with-you, my sister."

"Peace-be-with-you, my Grace," Neferah spoke aloud as she awoke on the couch. She lay there for a few moments trying to determine if this really happened or was just her imagination.

"It wasn't your imagination, Captain," the burly attendant smiled as she entered the room and helped Neferah to her feet. "You'll be driven to your apartment and notified of your new assignment tomorrow."

As old and tired as her body was, Neferah felt young in spirit. She was going to be with her love again after all. Maybe it would take thousands of years, but she could wait. Now there was something to hope for. Wherever Kin was, she hoped he felt the same as she did.

Chapter 18

Miri

Service out on the rimworlds is difficult at best. But, sometimes there are pleasant surprises. . . .

12:00-16 NASHIM 8580-7N5

The small planet below was beautiful and had a single moon orbiting it once every 30 days. Raphael stood watching the broad gridscreen on the ship's bridge and wondered what it would really be like down there, living in crude tents and eating the flesh of freshly slaughtered animals, some bred for that purpose. He'd undergone extensive skin treatments which changed his coloration from light blue to dark tan. He'd grown a beard and let his hair grow so it hung to his shoulders.

Fifteen years of training in the arts of survival and the use of primitive oral symbolism was hardly enough. He could see why the natives of this blue and white world couldn't imagine anything beyond their limited range of experience. They did not have the basic language tools, either oral or written, to express any kind of sophisticated ideas or concepts. Everything related to immediate objects such as animals, trees, stones, and other familiar things to explain rudimentary ideas. Although there were some primitive settlements, the majority of the natives were illiterate and overtly superstitious. They crafted objects and utensils from bone, wood, stone, and soft metals but lacked any form of energy except from animals and themselves. Anyone who was different or displayed any kind of superiority was considered to be either a god or a demon, depending on how they were received.

His co-workers, Gabriel and Michael, were preparing for their descent to the surface below in a special lighter. The Ansharim warship, 'TU5140 Aelon', was similar to the Tibot, being 600 meters-long and 60 meters-wide at her stern, and it carried only 15 crew members.

Raphael hoped this assignment wouldn't be as brutally disappointing as his last three missions. Aside from finding the SD Delaeobota's stranded crew on Paulota IV, and working with men who'd been trained under their influence, the other two assignments were worse than being in hell. He didn't even want to think about the terrible things primitive humans did to one another, especially after falling under the influence of the Legions of Light. From his briefings, he knew the enemy was here, but hadn't established a strong foothold yet. He would do so eventually if he wasn't stopped, or at least his activities checked and curtailed.

The introduction of off-world colonists would help protect the local population from being overwhelmed by Belial's legions, and it was hoped their long-term influence would help turn the tide of alien invasion. Raphael's only solace was that he could hear and feel the happy and innocent activities Jenn experienced on Mesziah with her funny little elf friends. Rinim did the right thing with respect to Jenn. With this in mind, he was willing to do his part.

He could rest now, knowing that Jenn was well and living a good life on Mesziah. He hoped being there would have a healing effect on her wounded mind and help her develop some sort of perspective. When he heard and felt her experiences with her little friends, he knew she was truly at home. In time she'd understand why the Nashramh needed her kind to protect her innocent Meszians from outside interference. Then she'd truly become a sister in their sacred sisterhood.

Raphael and his two co-workers were the only passengers, and their lighter took up most of the ship's single cargo bay. They would land their craft atop a small nondescript mountain bordered by a blue sea to the west, low rugged hills and mountains to the north and east, and desert areas to the south. The territory far to the south was singular. It was a land bridge between two continents which made this location strategic for planting colonists in a favorable setting, and for dispersal and retrieval.

Once they landed, the three were met by other watchers and escorted to a technically modern underground facility, the only one of its kind on the planet. At least it was the only one belonging to the Ansharim.

The underground facility was 200 meters below the surface and employed sophisticated monitoring and security systems to warn of intruders. All aspects of its design and construction were targeted toward long-term unexposed occupancy by off-world observers. Raphael saw that everything was taken into account, from orbiting enemy craft with high-gain scanning equipment, to modernization and technical advancement of the planet's future population.

The site had been carefully chosen, and certain rigid criteria were met before the Ansharim approved and installed it. First, it must be difficult to approach unnoticed, and located in an undesirable setting for both population centers and commercial exploitation. Second, the land must have no military value for present or future conflicts. Thus, the low hill was in a rugged area, though not high enough to make it a good observation post or easily defended. Its best feature was that it blended in with the rest of the terrain and had no spectacular characteristics. The area was devoid of water and unsuitable for grazing sheep or other animals, which also added to its anonymity. Basically, it wasn't good for much of anything except a hidden base. The chance of being discovered by the locals, even accidentally, was remote if not impossible.

Raphael was impressed by this thinking. The desolate place was so general in appearance that there was no way of pinpointing it without knowing its exact location.

Escorts led the three newcomers to an ingeniously disguised elevator which took them down to living quarters below; the lighter took off immediately and returned to the Aelon after their disembarkation. Raphael saw no air vents or other visible protrusions, and asked about where the air intakes and exhaust tubes were.

Ard, their guide, laughed and shook his head. "My friend, there are none. This entire facility is a closed system, and it's essentially a buried spaceship. How we were able to bury it is one of our secrets, but believe me, it has everything, including sub-binary drives. When we leave, our entire facility goes with us."

"Does that include the elevator shaft?"

"Most definitely, everything goes. You see, this craft is spherical and built of special materials not readily available in this part of the galaxy, at least in quantity. It's larger than you think and designed for continuous operation for more than 20,000 years before a major overhaul. We do all of our own onboard maintenance and we're well-stocked for long-term operations without outside supply. We produce our own atmosphere, grow our own food, and manufacture our normative supply items. Eventually we'll introduce new food products into the native population, along with medications. We'll accomplish this over a long period of time, and so subtly the locals won't suspect that it isn't their own people making the new discoveries. It will benefit the native races as well as supply better sustenance and protection for our own colonists. After all, this is a standard seeding facility which we employ on more than 80,000 different planets."

Raphael noticed the Ansharim didn't waste space. Their underground craft might be huge in overall dimensions, but its internal spaces were moderately proportioned without giving the impression of being closed in. They weren't in the habit of living in luxury, but insisted on a military frugality in everything. They were like the Nashramh, although more austere.

Raphael spent the first two years on this new world becoming acclimated to its various anomalies. He and his two companions were subjected to numerous medical tests and injected with various compounds and native organisms to condition them to the less than sanitary conditions above. It was important that they didn't bring any off-world organisms into contact with the natives, and they were immune to the effects of local organisms. There had been incidents in the past where entire populations were wiped out by off-world diseases brought by careless mining expeditions or shipwrecked travelers.

During this time, they were kept abreast of current affairs on the surface and drilled on native habits, languages, and techniques for using basic weapons. The locals were tough, but inefficient and clumsy fighters. Among these primitives there were those who were something more. Earlier off-world mining operations by non-G.C.C. consortiums were established prior to the Cataclysm and their low-level technicians had altered some of the human stock to accommodate their long-term activities. Thus, several advanced cultural groups remained after the technicians left under the

pressure of war. Raphael planned to look into these remnant cultures and their resident overseers before leaving the planet.

By the time they left the sanctuary, the three men looked and behaved like members of the local population; Raphael couldn't help but smile to himself when he thought of Jenn's reaction if she could see him in this garb. She'd probably run and hide.

Raphael and Michael were first assigned to escort a young Nashramh agent to the camp of off-world nomads to the east of the base. The nomads were an offshoot of the earlier pioneers who had gained the first foothold in this area. Totally incorporated into native bodies, they were descendents of the Schet, one of the Odomak houses. Their officers, most having originally come from Odomak military forces, were the only ones with limited heliocentric shrouds on their gamma-complexes and who consciously knew about their long-term mission. The others were totally immersed in their gamma-shrouds.

The Ansharim knew they would be most effective if they weren't immersed in conflicting memories and emotions that would cloud their judgment and ability to learn this planet's lessons. They had to become completely involved in the ways of this world and to identify with its other inhabitants to be effective. The only times they'd ever remember who and what they were would be when their physical bodies died and they were with their Necro-Classic Authorities between life cycles. The shrouds would be lifted just before their leaving this planet, at the end of their assignments, when the signal for their return sounded for the third time.

The young Nashramh operative, whom Raphael knew was his reincarnated daughter, Mirisca, was to be instrumental in infusing a new wave of colonists into the group. These colonists weren't due to arrive for another 400 to 500 years, and she'd establish the basis for their Necro-Classic Authority's oversight group before their arrival. Raphael and his co-workers would help her and plant 20,000 Necro-Receiving crystals at specific locations on all the planet's continents and major island groups.

Raphael remained silent and kept to himself as the two men climbed aboard an open aircraft which would fly them to their rendezvous with the girl, and then to their jump-off point. He wondered if she'd remember him after he disclosed his identity to her. Obviously she'd been apprised as to who he was and her relationship to him. She'd have to know something about this,

since her assignment required a binary-plus type personality who had trans-incarnate memories. She didn't know how much he'd shared her young life with Jenn and how much he loved her. He really wished Rinim and Ruby weren't so damned secretive when it came to personal matters.

The aircraft landed in the near-dark and two figures moved quickly towards it. Immediately, a small girl was thrust up into the cockpit and without hesitation, she threw her arms around Raphael's neck and kissed him.

"Oh thank God, you've finally arrived, Daddy!" she began to cry. "It's been so long and I've missed you so. Mom knows I'm alive again, and I have so much to tell you."

At first Raphael was speechless, although he recovered his wits and held Mirisca slightly away from him, looking at her tearful and smiling face. She was lovely, with coal black eyes and hair, and light tan skin. Her fine, clean features had an aristocratic air.

For a moment he'd forgotten she wasn't in the same body he'd helped provide for her, but in another. She still felt the same, though, as if they'd only been parted for a short time. It felt good to hold her close to him again.

"How did you recognize me so easily?" he laughed. "Michael and I both look like a couple of local primitives and I couldn't even see your face."

"I could feel you," she bubbled. "Oh, how I remember you holding me and whispering all sorts of lovely things to me when I was a baby."

"You remember everything?"

"Everything," she hugged him, "you can't imagine how much mom loves you, and so do I. We both waited, hoping you'd be able to come back to us . . . especially Mom. She never gave up hope. As I grew up, I realized you'd gone away for a reason, only I didn't know what it was. Right now, I feel so close to you, it seems as if we were never really apart."

"I feel the same, believe me. We'll have a lot to talk about on our way to S-3," he laughed hugging her close to him. "Now we have a lot of business to take care of."

"Do I get an introduction?" Michael nudged him. "Remember me, Michael?"

"I nearly forgot. Mirisca, this is the big guy, Michael, protector of little children and slayer of evil things that prowl in the dark. Michael, meet my daughter, Mirisca."

The pilot of the aircraft just grinned to himself and remained silent. These characters were something else, and he had no idea of what to expect from them next. A family affair was one of the last things he expected to encounter out here on this backward planet. The delicate-looking child must really be tough to be assigned to the rough-and-tumble Schet crowd at city S-3.

They flew to a site further east and landed after dark near the camp of a caravan. The primary pack animal was a small four-legged creature with long ears. They needed five of these beasts to carry their goods, which were all of local manufacture. These would be sold at their destination point, noted on their chart as city S-3, near where the Schet sub-tribe camped.

They were met outside the camp by a dark-skinned boy named Mustapha, who led them to the caravan master's tent, where they discussed the acquisition of their pack animals. Mustapha was a native Ansharim agent, one of many, who traveled with these caravans to different settlements and communities. He was delighted to meet Raphael, the first male Nashramh representative he'd ever come across. He was both cool and formal with little Mirisca, though, whom he addressed as 'Great Lady'. It seemed the Nashramh women didn't have a very good reputation with these field operatives, who had some bad encounters with rimfleet personnel.

Mustapha didn't know what to expect from this girl, so he decided to remain aloof and in the background around her. These Nashramh women were a tough and treacherous lot who did not have a reputation for dealing fairly with their Ansharim counterparts. He didn't want to find this out the hard way.

The caravan master was a lean, hard man who carried a long knife in his belt. He had two armed retainers to guard him at all times. When Mustapha introduced Michael and Raphael, he nodded his head and agreed to give them five of his best animals for a fee which Mustapha paid readily. Mirisca stood silently behind Raphael, ignored completely.

"Normally we haggle over the price for awhile," Mustapha explained later. "But he's terrified of off-worlders, whom he thinks are representatives of the gods. His price was high, but fair, and

the animals are his best. And, by the way, you can trust him not to cut your throat or steal your Great Lady, since your presence in his caravan insures that he won't be attacked or robbed. He thinks you have supernatural powers that will protect him and his property."

Their overland trip to city U-3 would take just over two local years, which were shorter than the Argonel year by about 20 percent. The actual distance wasn't more than 1,600 kilometers, but part of their immediate mission was to survey both the terrain and local population between the base and the target city. Their route began by traveling to the north through forested hill country and east through arid territory to a well-known oasis, noted as oasis S-10, and further north to town S-14, which was on the western waterway of the twin rivers that joined together just south of city S-3.

Once they reached town S-14, they would travel 1,000 kilometers south by land to the camp of their host, which lay just outside of the city. According to Ansharim forecasts, this entire area and the territory to the south was experiencing a progressive alteration of climate, which although arid to the east and south, would become nearly total desert within 3,000 years or less. Otherwise the climate and proximity of the two major river basins supported two off-world corporation influenced civilizations and a host of emerging cultural groups. Nearly all the surrounding populations were now fully immersed in working with soft metals, although flint was still popular with them as a domestic tool making material. All knew how to mine for and process gold.

Michael explained to Mustapha that they were surveying the territory as they went along, although their primary mission was to deliver Mirisca to city S-3. The actual nature of her mission was secret, but was important to both Ansharim and Nashramh plans. Mustapha nodded, noting that one of these women had contact with him, and she was tough as a tiger and twice as mean.

"Oh," Raphael turned to join the conversation. "What's her name?"

"She's called 'Maya', and she has skin as black as soot and eyes like perfect almonds. She claims to be the property of an animal driver, but I think it is he who belongs to her. Besides, she's a priestess of 'Inanna', and not a woman to be trifled with."

"Are you sure that she's with the Nashramh?"

"Absolutely!"

"We'll meet this woman and the others in time," Michael nodded. "We make a point of crossing paths every few years to exchange information and keep our ties in line."

They continued their conversation into the night after checking their animals and traveling equipment. Everything they carried with them was of local manufacture, as were their clothing and weapons. It was a general policy not to carry anything that wasn't local, since the population consisted of petty chieftains, customs agents, and thieves who got into everything. They stole anything whether it was nailed down or not, and if they wanted something badly enough, they would kill for it. Here, a man had to sleep with one eye open. Having special fighting skills was an absolute necessity on this world where violence was an everyday affair.

The following morning, Mustapha and another young man loaded their belongings on the five pack animals. They were traveling as light as possible, and chose to walk, using their animals only to carry Mirisca and their goods. Neither Michael nor Raphael made any pretense of being merchants or in any other trade. They appeared to be soldiers from the east, so no one bothered them with unwarranted questions. There were armed men and there were soldiers. Soldiers wore both their beards and weapons differently, and were far surer of their ground when a fight was brewing. None of the caravan merchants or their retainers wanted to start anything they couldn't finish, and more than likely enjoyed the added protection against local raiders.

Michael explained that these primitives were far from being stupid, and could determine a man's mettle by his stance. He and Raphael were calm, and in total control of their emotions, were impressive since younger soldiers were prone to strut and glare. They appeared to be seasoned officers to the merchants, except for the caravan master who thought they were messengers from the gods.

"Still," he cautioned, "here, we can never take anything for granted. There's always a chance of being targeted for murder or theft. If anyone threatens you in any way, don't hesitate to kill him on the spot. To do otherwise would bring all of them down on us, since they'd interpret any other conduct as a sign of fear."

"Have you killed any of these people?" Mirisca asked.

"Yes, quite a few."

"I take it there was no possible alternative then," she spoke softly, nodding her head.

"None."

"Strike first and quickly," Raphael agreed. "Giving any kind of warning is foolhardy where some people are concerned."

"Exactly," Michael nodded. "This is an uncompromising gang of cutthroats, whether they are ten-year-old little boys or grown men. Beware of all of them equally. These children are trained to be thieves and killers early, although they can be innocent-looking and disarming to a stranger. They give you their innocent little smiles, and when your turn your back they stab you without a second thought. Their idea of justice is that everything is to be done for them and in the way they want it. None of them know how to compromise about anything."

Their journey took them along a well-traveled route leading north through forested hills. Although the track couldn't be correctly called a road, it was a well-trodden path. The hills in the area appeared to be mostly limestone, much like the mountain where their underground base was located, with groves of olive and fig trees being grown near populated areas. They passed up through valleys where wheat and vines were cultivated and then onto a small plain by a village called Shookhayim. They purchased provisions here and traded gossip with the local people who appeared to be moderately friendly. The local chieftain considered him self a king, and had a number of bullies as his retainers and collectors of duties from the caravans.

"In this region, every little chieftain is a king," Michael noted, "and some of them take the title quite seriously."

"They appear to be an illiterate bunch," Raphael responded. "Do they offer much to their people, other than protection from neighboring bullies?"

"Oddly, they do. For example, these people are all related by blood, and the leaders give them a sense of well-being as well as a modicum of leadership. Some get a little greedy and want all the pretty girls for their wives or concubines, and to live in a grand style. It works as long as there's prosperity and no one seems to dispute the system. Besides, their strongmen exact duties from the caravans, and everybody benefits to some degree or other."

One of the duty collectors, who'd been studying Mirisca for a short time, motioned to four of his fellows and came over to Raphael.

"Is this woman your wife?" the big bearded man spoke slowly, fondling the hilt of his short sword.

"She is my sister," Raphael answered coolly, without any show of emotion.

"Our king requires that all pretty women be brought before him for his choosing. You will be paid for her."

"With all respect for your honored king, we will pass on with my sister accompanying us."

All four bearded men moved forward as their leader drew his sword. "You leave us no choice, foreigner."

The words hardly left his lips before the burly man was dead. Raphael moved so swiftly that the leader and the other three hadn't time to level their spears before he was on them and cutting them to pieces. It was all over in less than a minute, and eight other local bullies ran over to see what happened.

Raphael ignored them, and carefully wiped the blood from his sword with one of the dead men's cloaks.

"Ho!" Michael bellowed. "Do we have a little entertainment here? Why wasn't I invited, Raphael! Maybe these others will give me some challenge?"

"Nay, nay, we have nothing to do with this misunderstanding, oh, great warrior," the other bullies responded with alarm, seeing that one man butchered the toughest of their number without any sign of effort. "We only seek to serve our king as is befitting his high station. Go now in peace, we beseech you!"

The caravan master walked over to the group and surveyed the carnage. "Didn't I tell you we had great warriors traveling with us? Are you so backward that you try to deal with them as mere commoners? What, only four dead? Ha! My kind warriors have been merciful and allowed the rest of you to live. Why do you stand here gaping? You are free to leave."

Raphael ignored the caravan master's diatribe and walked over to Mustapha as if nothing really happened.

"Put our Grand Lady on her mount, and prepare to leave. I am weary of this hovel. It lacks any challenge."

"Oh, yes my great master!" Mustapha bowed. "Your word is my command!"

Once they passed out of the forested hills, the land became more arid and the local inhabitants seemed to be a tougher breed. The large oasis, listed as S-10, was a natural meeting place for caravans coming from the north, south, and east. The water was surprisingly good and they were impressed by the number of racial types that congregated there.

"This is one of our primary meeting points," Michael noted. "Since it's a commercial hub, a valuable oasis, and crossroads serve the entire area. Our people have been involved in the caravan business from the very beginning of our presence here. This way, we travel around freely and keep tabs on everything that happens. The Nashramh woman, who Mustapha mentioned earlier, comes through here once every seven years. The caravan she's part of travels from the high mountains, far to the east, to the flat river delta on the continent to the south of us. The process we use to travel with different caravans disguises the fact that we don't age as fast as these short-lived natives do. We alter our appearance often enough that we can claim to be descendants of previous traders who passed through here years ago. Thus far, we've been successful."

They'd traveled east to the twin-rivers and then south for 1,000 kilometers until they reached the Schet encampment. During the entire trip, Mirisca and Raphael talked about her mission here as well as past times and her life with Jenn. It was a time they both enjoyed, getting to know one another after being apart for so long. As far as Raphael was concerned, the time they spent together helped make up for many of the things they'd lost because of his unfortunate separation from her and Jenn.

"You don't know how much I needed someone like you and mom, especially after what happened to me during my last assignment. Mom was more of an angel from paradise, if ever there was such a place, compared to the hell I'd been in. I was serving as an undercover intelligence agent with our cultural outreach group, on Omol-et-Yao III, when I was discovered by the black bastards. The planet's population was completely under the thumb of the black ones and their priesthood, although the inhabitants didn't need anything to make them any more cruel or cunning than they already were. I was imprisoned for life in a filthy hole where I was raped, tortured, starved, and finally murdered after 21 years of sheer hell. I'm still not quite clear on how my sisters were able to

penetrate that terrible black hole and rescue my gamma-B. Whatever the case, Mom's wonderful approach to life and her compassion and joy were what it took to help heal my psychic injuries and strengthen my resolve to live and work on for these poor primitives out on the rim. I don't want to dwell on how badly I was hurt, but I want to talk about the things mom and I did that made everything balance out so well."

Raphael enjoyed hearing about all of her experiences with Jenn, her little friends, and Aunty Rinim. He knew how Jenn viewed her experiences, but hearing Mirisca's side of it brought tears to his eyes every time she discussed the subject. In fact, he really couldn't hear enough about their life together.

"You know, Dad," she confided. "Mom told me that Aunty Rinim was a very important person in our sisterhood, but I really can't imagine her as being anything except Aunty Rinim."

"What do you mean by that?" he laughed.

"Oh, just that she's such a sweet and funny-looking woman, and I can't imagine Aunty Rinim being very important as far as our political or military organization is concerned. She talks as if she was a professor of arcane metaphysics that exist in another dimension and nobody really seems to understand her."

Raphael suppressed his urge to laugh and answered her with a straight face.

"My dear little daughter, I'm afraid your mother was absolutely right in what she told you. Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor is the most powerful living member of our sisterhood and has been the head of Council Central for over 100,000 years. She was more than 3,000,000 years old before our sisterhood was even thought of, and she's been a powerful force with us for longer than 300,000 years."

Mirisca was dumbfounded, but realized he was telling her the absolute truth.

"I'd never have guessed she was a Magum, much less such a powerful personality. She . . . she's so human and kind. I guess I have a lot to learn, don't I?"

The three arrived at the Schet encampment which was just two kilometers north from the center of city S-3, and about 300 meters from the west river. They were met by the group's senior officer, whose rank and title was called Ab-ha-Ther-ah in the local dialect. He knew Michael from a previous meeting when they'd made plans

together for Mirisca to be brought into the camp. The old man sat back on a pile of cushions and studied the three newcomers while he waited for one of his younger officers to arrive.

"We refer to our subordinate officers as being our sons," he noted to Raphael. "The local people are tribe oriented, so we follow suit. Actually, none of my officers are actually related to me by blood, but we maintain the fiction for appearances. On this world, appearances are far more important than substance, and we must strive to build cover stories in the local vernacular to satisfy everybody. Also, giving the impression of being related adds to our strength. Here, the old adage that blood is thicker than water does hold true. It's quite a game."

The second-in-command arrived shortly and sat across from their guests, studying each face before speaking.

"It's good to have such renowned guests. Welcome to our camp and peace-be-with-you."

"No need for that local foolishness, B'Ha-ran," he addressed the man by his rank rather than his name. "We can speak in a more comfortable mode now," he continued in galactic common.

"That will be better for the moment," B'Ha-ran agreed.

Smiling broadly, the old man addressed Mirisca. "Well, now, my little princess, I see you're an elf. I used to have an elf lieutenant on my crew some time back, a damned good man. Of course, I only had the best on my crew."

"What crew was that?" Michael asked, noting the gleam in the old man's eye.

"Oh," he spoke wistfully, "that was way back during the very beginning of the Great Conflagration. My fleet destroyer, the Constance, was one of the first casualties of that conflict. I had the best damned crew in the Odomak navy and chose every last man and woman myself. They were the best. Just like my people here on this assignment."

Raphael knew now just who this tough-looking character was, and was curious why top Odomak naval officers were assigned to this kind of duty. "How is it you were put in command of a planetside unit, Captain Roydel?"

"You're fast on the uptake, sir!" the old man responded with surprise. "How in the hell did you know my name?"

"I have some past experience with members of your noble family of Odomak naval officers," Raphael answered, "and I was also

acquainted with the young elfin officer you spoke of on the Constance. But then, we aren't here to talk about me."

"But we will, sir. I can see you're an important personage from that Nashramh outfit. I don't underrate any of you, and I know about the damnable treachery the loss of my ship caused before the war started. We Odomaks had nothing to do with that damned fiasco."

"We're well aware of that, Captain."

"Well, to answer your question, sir. I volunteered for this assignment, and I'm damned glad I did. I have a different perspective on how the affairs on planetside are conducted and can appreciate the role of our navy in supporting these operations. As you said earlier, we Roydels have made our careers as naval officers a tradition. But then, it's like any profession we engage in: we need other experiences to give us both a wider perspective and a tactical edge. If you haven't had any experience out here in the field, then it'll be a real education for you. As to our lovely little princess here, I already know she's the best we have for the tricky job she has to do. You won't lack any support from us, my dear, and believe me, you are most welcome among us."

"Captain Roydel and his three senior officers will be taken back to our base when their job is done, and will return with our Princess Mirisca to our RAD station in about 200 years," Michael added. "Their role here will be done and a new group of operatives will initiate the transition between the pioneer and colonial phase of our operations for the next two centuries. Then it's all a new game that should last about 4,000 years or more."

Michael and Raphael left that same day to work with Mirisca until her mission was completed. They grew to respect her skills, and understand just how their Necro-Classic Authority was established. If Raphael hadn't known about many of the secrets of his Nashramh's Council Central, he might have thought something was supernatural about the entire operation.

During the project, Mirisca maintained a position of hidden authority, and set the foundations for a cover story in the form of a tribal myth that played on all sorts of local customs and superstitious practices. Within the structure of the myths, she infused a long-term oral tradition that would sustain her successors until the time of their return many thousands of years in the future. She, and all of her sisters to come were experts in

the art of establishing a long-term organizational structure through which high-grade intelligence and clandestine operations could be pursued without detection. She played on every preconceived myth and prejudice in the host cultures to hide her activities, and taught her successors how to work openly under the noses of their detractors.

When Mirisca was ready to leave after a century, the foundation of the Necro-Classic Authority was securely established and the location of a special 'well of the guardian women' was determined, with a marker set there for future builders. All of this was done as she and a group of the Schet, under the command of one of Roydel's officers, moved across the territory acting as well-to-do nomads.

Raphael was responsible for reviewing Mirisca's work and for determining whether her program would sustain the minimum 6,000-year time span the project's planners anticipated. He was amazed at her thoroughness and found nothing unattended to. As the off-world colonists were introduced into and mixed with the local population, they would migrate out to the other continents as both the world's population and technology increased in numbers and complexity. No matter where they migrated to, there would be Necro-Classic posts located within a reasonable distance from wherever they lived and died.

The next phase was for him and his associates to plant the 20,000 Necro-Classic crystals at strategic locations around the planet. This required them to survey each site and post crystals at predetermined locations. Future colonists who were primed for manning these posts would be given instructions relating to each crystal's service area.

One other problem was evident in their project. The enemy had gained a solid foothold in both of the world's eastern and western hemispheres. According to the Ansharim's agents, there were three enemy strongholds. One was in the high mountains to the east of their base, where two continents were in collision. They referred to this underground city as the Target K-1, or in the native language as the 'Name of Calamity'. The place was manned by Colmers and a single Tiamat, who'd all taken on the names of local gods and goddesses. The underground fortification was as well-disguised as their base, and no one had discovered where it was hidden. There was supposed to be a second underground 'outreach' city, referred

to as Target K-2 located in the deserts far to the north of Target K-1, but its location and actual existence was still in question. The third underground city, in the world's western hemisphere, was accurately located and was scheduled for destruction at a later time. During the interim, the Ansharim hoped to trace the locations of the other two enemy bases by tracking aircraft entering and leaving the western city. Apparently the enemy felt the remote mountain range of the southwestern continent where their underground base was located was unobserved by anyone on the planet. It was obvious that they knew of the Ansharim presence, but discounted it as nothing more than an insignificant survey team.

It would be Raphael's and his team's job to discover the location of these underground cities during their travels in the area. Nothing would be easy, and the presence of the enemy in force was a real drawback for future operations.

Chapter 19

Maya

Parting from this mortal coil can be violent and painful, or gentle and rewarding . . . depending, of course, on who you are and where you die. . . .

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The dark-skinned girl ducked under Raphael's tent flap and brought him a tray with earthen dishes and a bowl of water on it.

Looking up, Raphael was surprised. "Who are you? Where's Mustapha?"

"The man Mustapha bid me to serve your meal. Where does the master want me to put his tray?" she whispered, lowering her eyes and bowing.

Raphael paused for a moment, then, dodged as the girl lunged at him with a long knife she had concealed under the tray. She was lightning fast and agile with the weapon, but missed him by only a fraction of a millimeter. She ducked and countered a blow that knocked her spinning to the ground, but was up and pursuing her attack without hesitation. Raphael hadn't time to draw his own knife, and fended her off with speed and fighting reflexes. Realizing that she couldn't outmaneuver him, the girl threw her knife at him and ducked out of the flap to escape.

The fleeing woman stopped dead still as if she'd run into a stone wall, and doubled up as the air was knocked out of her. Raphael saw the point of a bronze knife plunge out of her back and then disappear. Her limp body was thrown to the ground. Another woman pulled her chin up and slashed her throat.

"Did she wound you?" the black-skinned woman yelled in galactic common. "Did she cut you anywhere?"

"Only a slice on my right ankle," he answered, noting the burning wound for the first time. He hadn't realized he had been cut until he looked down and saw the bleeding. Then the wound began to throb and burn.

"Let me see it!" the black woman insisted, moving over to the light. Oddly the oil lamp hadn't been knocked over during the brief scuffle.

Raphael didn't know who she was, but the wound was now burning and aching clear to the bone. Only a minute had gone by and the wound throbbed and the intense burning began to spread rapidly. "It hurts like hell," he responded, hissing through his teeth in the native language. After what just happened, he wasn't sure if he should defend himself against this new intruder or accept her help. Unfortunately, he wasn't in a position to do much fighting as the burning sensation spread into his foot.

"Oh, shit!" she mumbled, pulling off her cloth belt and wrapping it around Raphael's leg just above the knee. "Her damned knife was poisoned! See, the wound is turning a deep blue! Here, lie down while I make this tourniquet. Akhem!" she screamed out. "Akhem, bring my med-kit!"

Raphael didn't know who this woman was, but there was no question that he'd been poisoned by the knife cut. His foot was completely black and a deep blue streak was moving slowly up toward his knee. His flesh felt as if it were on fire.

Gabriel ducked into the tent with his sword drawn, and another man followed at his heels.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "And, who the hell's this woman?"

"An ally," the black woman spoke out in galactic common. "Your friend's been attacked by that dead thing over there. Akhem, where is it?"

"Here, Maya," he growled, handing her a cloth packet of bronze knives and tools.

Looking Raphael straight in the eye, the woman, Maya, spoke evenly and clearly in galactic common. "I have to cut the leg off immediately before the poison moves up any further. I know this poison well, and we don't have anything to stop its effects except to

remove the infected tissue. There's no time to argue or discuss the point. I must remove the leg now!"

Raphael nodded, "I know. Do what you can. I'll try to keep my mouth shut."

Between the intense pain and fear of losing his leg, Raphael suddenly remembered the same situation of centuries long past, when as Miriam, he'd lost both legs because of poisoning. "Oh my god, history does repeat itself," he mumbled to himself as he clenched his teeth to keep from crying out.

"You two," Maya gestured, referring to Gabriel and Akhem, "hold him down, we don't have time to drug him."

The two responded quickly as she burned the edges of her knives in the flame of the oil lamp. Then she moved with expert precision and cut the leg off, just above the knee, using a bronze saw to sever the bone. Raphael bit down on a wooden knife handle Akhem shoved between his teeth, and tried to keep from screaming.

* * *

Jenn was stirring a pot of new jelly she'd squeezed out of cooked fruit when suddenly her right leg felt like it was being cut off. The pain was so sudden that she screamed in surprise. Holding her leg, she fell to the kitchen floor, screaming out in both pain and terror. Neff flew in the door to see what was happening, followed by four little elves that'd been playing outside.

"Oh my, what's wrong, what's wrong?" the elves cried out, wringing their hands and not knowing what to do.

Jenn screamed once more and fainted. The elves didn't have the slightest idea of what to do, so they patted her face and cried for her.

* * *

Raphael awoke slowly, his head feeling light and fuzzy. He recognized the effects of a powerful narcotic, but couldn't identify what it was. As his eyes cleared, he saw the soot-black image of what appeared to be a middle-aged woman, with almond shaped eyes that were too big for her face, and a dark ragged scar on her right cheek. Gabriel was standing quietly behind her.

"It looks like I made it," he mumbled through his narcotic thickened tongue. "Thanks for saving my life."

The woman nodded, placing her hand over his eyes. He felt himself slipping back into a deep sleep. He was to remain in a narcotic induced sleep for four days.

"So you're Maya," Raphael smiled up from his bedroll, "I've heard a little bit about you. I thank you again for saving my life."

"Your friend, Gabriel, leads me to understand you're from my sisterhood," she spoke slowly, her face unsmiling. "Is this true?"

"Do I look like a woman?" he answered, still not sure who this woman, Maya, really was.

"You're a Tachalet Kadomon," she answered, "I could tell from the leg I cut off. From your eyes, I suspect you're a Magum and, I ah. . ." she paused, "I remember seeing eyes like yours once, although I don't quite know when or where, it was someone from long ago . . . oh, very, very long ago."

"Do you remember anyone named Jenn?" he probed, suspecting now who she really was.

After a long pause, she answered. "My mother, of long ago, was named Jenn. We were elves, she and I. But, I doubt you could mean the same person."

"You say your name is Maya, do you not?"

"That is what I'm called here."

"I knew someone with the same feel as I'm beginning to get from you, a long time ago. Only she was a small baby at the time. Her mother was an elf named Jenn. In fact, Jenn was, and is still my best friend."

"And what was this little baby's name?"

"Myrnah."

"Yes, that's my true name," Maya smiled broadly. "I was named after my father's mother . . . his name was Neftalak. He and my brother, Telakin, were both killed in the Great Conflagration. Did you know them also?"

"Yes, I knew them both."

"Then, you can be no other than the woman with the beautiful and strange eyes whom my mother told me was her best friend. I remember this clearly, although I was only a child at the time. Yes, you can be no other than her friend Miriam . . . yes wearing a man's body doesn't fool me. Any Magum can be born comfortably in either a man's or woman's body."

"My name is Raphael," he smiled, "Raphael B'Thebel."

"Oh yes, that's one of your ten names, but to me you are Miriam . . . Miriam B'Meszhiah. I wish I could remember more about that time, but I can't. I recall, though, it was a hard time for my mother, Jenn. Both my father and brother were gone, probably dead by that time, and she and I were separated."

"You will call me Raphael, though, will you not?"

"Oh, certainly, no need to advertise our secrets, my dear sister. And, know you this. I will not leave your side as long as you remain on this primitive world. No, neither I nor my partner, Akhem, will leave your side for a moment!"

The two talked together for a while, before Raphael fell asleep again. It took longer for him to recover from his amputation than he'd expected, although it didn't come as any real surprise to either Maya or Gabriel.

After a month and a half, Raphael was fit to travel, but Maya didn't approve of it. Therefore, she decided they would remain at the oasis for another month before moving east to the great river delta. It was apparent to Raphael that she ran the show around here. When she made a decision, nobody argued, but rather followed her orders. During that time, Maya came to him daily and discussed all sorts of matters about different lands she and Akhem had visited and the state of affairs among the various native races.

Maya was a wealth of information about the various people and types of terrain they would encounter along the way, and was eager to share it. She also pumped him with questions about Jenn, Neftalak, and Telakin. Raphael described them with accurate details about their manners, thoughts, and physical beings. He did omit any mention of Neftalak's indiscretions with women, though. Maya was able to fill in many of the other blanks in her memory.

"Akhem and I have been all over the territory between here and the great cataract to the south of the wonderful lake beyond, whence the River of Life is born, and up to the high mountains of Tebet far to the north and east of the twin-rivers. We change our identities every 21 years, although it's getting harder for me to do as I get older. Because of this, we're changing our routes of travel and only returning to the old places once every 40 years."

"I see," Raphael nodded. "By the way, my servant, Mustapha, tells me that you own Akhem rather than him owning you. Is this information really true?"

"Of course not, he's my master in all things."

Akhem was standing a meter behind her, wagging his head to the right and left, and smiling.

"But, I'm sure Mustapha said it was you who owned your man servant," Raphael pressed. "I'm sure that's what Mustapha said to me."

Akhem nodded his head in agreement with Raphael's statement.

"You're wrong," she spoke seriously, "Akhem is the leader and I always do exactly what he wants."

Akhem wagged his head back and forth again.

"I guess I must have misunderstood," Raphael toned his voice seriously. "You do have a strong personality, though, and it would be easy to make the wrong assessment of the situation."

"Oh, I do move quickly," she smiled. "I always stab first and then find out whether the other person was my friend or foe. On this hard-pressed little world it's an absolutely necessary rule to survive, especially if you're a woman."

Later, Akhem told of how he and Maya worked together as a close-knit team over the years.

"She likes to think I'm the leader of our team, Raphael. But it isn't true. She's strong-willed, treacherous, and unforgiving, and because she is my true ally, I'm able to sleep peacefully anywhere on this violent world. She has uncanny sight in the dark and prowls the night, looking for enemies. You've noticed that big scar on her face? Well, she caught a sword aimed at me in the dark last year, and saved my life. I thought then I'd lost her and it nearly destroyed me, but she's a tough one and held on to her life. If it were a choice as to who would die and who would live, I'd choose to perish in her stead. She's the woman I truly love."

"What happened to the man who cut her with the sword?"

"I gutted the son-of-a-bitch."

"Good."

"Before you leave, Akhem, what did Maya mean when she said you and she would never leave my side while I remained on this world?"

"We'll do just that. We will travel with you from now on and act as your guides and personal bodyguards. Now, after you nearly escaped from assassination, she is worried it might happen again. She might be a bit pushy and tough, but she's also intensely loyal

to those whom she feels close to. Maya definitely has an affinity for you and won't let you court danger without her protection. That's her absolute will and also my desire. Don't bother pulling rank on her, Raphael my good friend. The decision has been made and inscribed on stone, and that's that!"

"I bow to her decision and your desire," Raphael smiled. "I can't think of two more worthy companions, and I, too, will feel much safer with her in my camp."

Gabriel had been looking around and informed Raphael that the woman, Maya, had taken care of avenging his attempted murder. She'd discovered the name of the priest who owned the servant girl assigned to kill him, and had done the man to death with her knife. The killing was done so quietly that the dead priest wasn't discovered until the next morning by his manservant who'd been asleep in the tent's entrance. No one had the slightest idea of who cut his throat, and his caravan left with his body slung over a pack animal's back.

"It was a damned neat piece of work," Gabriel spoke softly. "Not a sign or a sound. I haven't seen anything more professionally done in all my years in the field. We are indeed fortunate to have her on our team. And, did you know she can see in the dark? Prowls around like a cat in the night."

* * *

Jenn lived in her stone cottage with its bright red shale roof for 629 years. During her lifetime on Mesziah, she'd made thousands of friends and loved the easy-going life on this world of peace and plenty. Her cottage stood next to a clear waterway in the densely wooded delta region known as the 'Enchanted Forest', where it was never dark. The light of the sun never passed through the high forest trees, but was filtered through a heavy mist that always hung over the moist ground and radiated from glowing mosses growing everywhere. Both light and sound were strangely different from anywhere else on this lovely world and elves from thousands of kilometers away made trips to visit this enchanting place for important occasions as marriages and special births.

Jenn lived a happy and contented life, which was disturbed only once when something happened to her. Long ago, when she'd felt a terrible pain stabbing through her right leg just above the knee. It felt like her leg was being cut off, although the pain faded

and never returned. A discreet sense in the back of her mind suggested that something happened to Raphael and she was experiencing his pain. She really missed her husband and often wondered what he was doing, but had no hint other than the incident with her leg, and the fact that she now walked with a pronounced limp. Her days were busy with chores, story-telling, thinking, and answering thousands of important questions asked by the elves.

Jenn never thought of herself as being either smart or wise as her friends seemed to think, but they looked up to her for advice and answers to their important questions. She gained a reputation far and wide as being 'Jenn from the Stars', who knew everything. She couldn't help but think of Miriam, who really did know about everything there ever was. If any of the elves had something important to know, chances were they'd end up at Jenn's doorstep looking for an answer.

One day, a particularly tall, red-haired elf girl came over to Jenn's door, asking about odd things that happened far away. Jenn put her weaving material down on the long dining room table and rose from her chair to answer the door.

"Uh, are you Jenn from the stars with a thinking cap?"

"Yes I am. And, what is your name?"

"Ah yes, my name is Nimmy, and I've traveled all the way from the high mountains, past Mister Grump, overlooking the great ocean."

"I see. Well, please come in and sit down, Nimmy. I'll get you some refreshments."

Without pausing to sit down, the tall elf burst out. "I was wondering, Jenn, how do you know when you've grown old enough to do something else?"

"I don't understand, my dear, old enough to do what?"

"Uh . . . Oh dear, I forgot my question. I forgot why I was going to ask it . . . oh dear, I forgot the point! I'm so embarrassed, please forgive me. Its just that it took me a long time to get here, and I did have a lot of stops to make along the way to visit all my friends," Nimmy stammered. She stared down at her shoes, as if she wished she could will them to run away and hide.

Jenn smiled inwardly, since the poor girl looked like she'd melt into the floor.

"Oh, that's quite all right, It may come back to you again, Nimmy. You were asking how you would know when you're old enough to do something else."

"I don't recall why I asked the question. I did indeed forget the point! Well, as long as I'm here, maybe I should visit some of the people around here. Maybe there's a party going on or something like that." Nimmy said this as she put her chin in the cup of her right hand.

"That sounds like a good idea. Why don't you have some refreshments before you leave?"

"Why thank you, Jenn. Don't mind if I do. My tummy does feel a bit empty right now, and it's been awhile since breakfast. I haven't had a bite since I left Nester's cottage. She gave me some goodies to bring with me so I could eat along the way, but we were so busy talking that I forgot them."

After a short period of time, Nimmy finished her berry bread and spice tea. She invited Jenn to any party she might go to just in case, since she didn't want anybody's feelings to be hurt, especially Jenn's. And, if there wasn't a party planned at the moment, there soon would be. After all, Nimmy had traveled all the way from the high western mountains and that was worth celebrating.

Jenn said good-day to Nimmy who was just leaving to visit the neighbor's cottage, when several of her elfin friends arrived at the door.

"I see you were visiting Jenn from the Stars, Nimmy," one of the little newcomers chirped. "Did you have an important question to ask her?"

"Of course she had an important question to ask!" chimed in another elf. "After all, Jenn from the Stars has a thinking cap, and you don't think Nimmy would come all the way from the high mountains for nothing, do you?"

"Please do share your question with us, Nimmy! We would like to hear it," one little voice chirped. "Jenn from the Stars will certainly know the answer."

"Yes, I did come all this way to ask a question, but then I forgot the point," Nimmy said apologetically.

"Oh my, that's terrible!" one of the elves cried out. "She forgot what her question was! Why don't you do what I do? Put a brightly colored string around your finger, and then you'll remember to ask the question. It usually works for me, unless," she hesitated, "I lose

the string! Well, you can't go home yet. You came all this way for something important and I think we should have you to one of our parties so you'll feel better about forgetting what your question was."

"Yes, that's a splendid idea! We can't have Nimmy going back home right away after just getting here. Come with us, Nimmy, and we can get the party going sometime today," a chubby little elf spoke solemnly as he tugged at her arm. "And, you never know, while we're having a good time singing and dancing, you might remember what your question is. Jenn from the Stars will be there and she'll answer it before you forget it again."

The whole village showed up for the party, as usual. There was plenty of food, stories, music, and dancing. Everyone enjoyed parties and Nimmy was their special guest. Jenn was invited, as usual, as were the faeries, Neff included. The older elves were sitting around; listening to the music and watching the younger people dance and sing, when their conversation turned to where their next party should take place. Each elf described his or her home in detail, and explained why it would be the best place for the next party.

Jenn's neighbor, Milsah, began by bragging about her color scheme and the handiwork her husband did on framing leafy vines on her cottage walls. She went on telling everyone about her chairs and tables which were made so well that everyone would just love being there and having a grand party. Each elf thought he or she had the best cottage and accommodations for a grand party and nothing else could compare to it. The deciding factor was based on who made their announcement for throwing a party first, and put on the 'spread', which would cover tables both indoors and out in their cottage garden.

Sitting on a stool at the head of the table, Jenn just shook her head at all the chitter-chatter and bragging going on between all of them. She'd been to all of their cottages and knew they were all equally the best for giving a great party and being wonderful hosts and hostesses. There wasn't anything she could think of that she wanted more than to be here, except she wished that Raphael and Mirisca could share this good and beautiful life with her.

The longer she lived here the more she grew to love this wonderful place and its colorful people. They were such a happy and gentle society where everyone cared for every-one else. Their

only crime, if she could call it a crime, was to bicker over who had the prettiest babies, the grandest cottage, or who could throw the biggest party with the most food, and who was the best storyteller.

When anyone of them was sick or hurt, the other elves gathered around to give moral support with tears in their eyes and they would hurt right along with the patient. Later, they'd stand around and bicker about who had the best cure for whatever the ailment was.

Jenn began to understand why she'd been sent here into exile, if she could really call it that. She wondered what would happen to these happy and innocent people if the black ones came here and found them. The very idea really scared her, and she realized that she wanted to protect these elves from such a terrible fate, only she didn't have the slightest idea of how to do so. She just wanted to take this wonderful world and hide it away forever so that it couldn't be found by anyone who was evil.

A little later, Neff told Jenn about a conversation she had with some other faeries. It seems one of them came down from the high mountains with Nimmy, and remembered what the important question was.

"That's great!" Jenn burst out. "Now we can talk about it after the party's over and Nimmy will have something else to be happy about!"

* * *

As the years passed, Jenn grew old gracefully but was not very strong, although her mind remained unusually sharp. Many of her elf friends discussed her extreme age and weakened condition with the local faeries who told them she would soon die. The elves felt there should be something special done for the event, since everyone loved Jenn from the Stars and wanted to be present when she went to her long sleep. There was already some speculation about when she'd be born as a new baby, and whether she would wear her thinking cap again. Everyone was in agreement that her cap should be kept in the cottage for her when she needed it again, and the faeries agreed.

The faeries, who weren't human and who were very old, knew death wasn't to be dreaded, but rather something to be accepted as a part of nature's way and therefore to be celebrated. If a person lived a long and happy life, what was there to fear? After all, a

person wouldn't be gone forever, just asleep for awhile, before returning to a new life in time. Everyone would be waiting, and the person would be born into a new body, after which everybody would celebrate the event and welcome them back. The faeries always knew who new people were being reborn into new bodies.

As the day of Jenn's death approached, the faeries told her many friends about a party to be held outside her cottage window so that she could hear the festivities and go to sleep knowing her friends were near and sharing their joy with her. They'd have all sorts of music that was loud enough to be heard clearly in her cottage. The faeries would tell everybody all sorts of special stories about Jenn and how she was going to sleep for a long time before coming back as a little elf baby. The faeries were very old and knew all about these things, and the elves never tired of hearing the wonderful stories about their friends and relatives who'd gone on to their long sleeps and then been reborn again.

Neff opened Jenn's bedroom window a crack so she could hear the music and festivities outside. Neff had never left her side since the day she had arrived on Mesziah, whether Jenn knew it or not.

Today would be no different. Neff would stay with Jenn until she went to sleep for the last time in this life.

Jenn lay on her back, with her head propped up on a pillow, and drifted in and out of her dreams. Neff was always there when she awoke, with water for her to drink. She seemed eager to listen to Jenn's words.

"I was just talking to Quorib," Jenn smiled up from her bed, with tears in her eyes. "She's such a good friend to me and I've missed her so. It was so good to see her funny little face and to hear her lispy voice again. We were reminiscing about all the good times we had when we were young. Stay close to me, Neff. When she comes back again, I'll introduce you to her." She closed her eyes and went back to sleep with a warm smile on her face, looking forward to her next conversation.

From time to time, Jenn awakened to find Neff sitting next to her and she would tell her about all of her friends who'd been talking to her while she was asleep.

She told Neff all about her friends from long ago, many of whom she thought had been lost in the Great Conflagration. Still, they visited her and had so many wonderful things to say. Then she drifted off to sleep again.

"What in the galaxy do you have that dumb look on your face for, Jenn? Is there something under the table?" Rinim started to look under the tablecloth.

"Yes, there is something under the table, or should I say there are two somethings in my lap, wiggling. They're called Miri feet, and more commonly known as pests." She stated with a poker face as she tickled the bottoms of the intruding feet.

"Oh, does this annoy you, Mommy?"

"No, never, I love to have the dead weight of your feet on my lap with your goofy toes wiggling around while I try to eat my dinner. Why ever did you think that it annoyed me?"

"I don't know. I just noticed a little bit of something in your voice when you were speaking to Aunty Rinim. I hope my feet don't annoy you. It's just that they're tired from walking all over the place."

"I see," she answered, glancing over at Rinim. "Tired from all that walking, how tragic. . . ."

The cloudy sky brightened to a dull grey, and Jenn could now see a low line of cliffs ahead of her through the persistent drizzle; she quickened her step.

Her entire body ached, and while walking over the coarse sand, she carefully probed herself with her finger tips.

It seemed her nose was broken, which accounted for the pain when she breathed through it, and her front teeth were missing.

"Tell me about the 'Enchanted Forest', Mommy." Miri asked with an intent expression on her sweet face and her eyes full of wonder.

"I'll describe it a little later in the story, okay?"

"Okay, I can wait."

"Well, first of all, there are all kinds of things these people have to consider before a grand party commences. Such as who will be invited to the party, and how many invitations will be delivered. What the menu will be, and who is to bring what, and how long it will last, and so on and so forth. Finally, after all of the decisions are made, the faeries take invitations to the mountains and deliver them to the High Elves."

"What are they like, Mommy?"

"Well, uh, first of all, the high elves who live in the mountains used to be rather odd in appearance, but as off-world people had more to do with them, over a long period of time, they became more like people we know - more human, I guess. Their skin was usually dark so they blended in easily with the surrounding environment, and to this day some still have antennae on their

foreheads. This I understand is part of their sensory system, like a combination of hearing and feeling at the same time."

"Hey! Miriam, this is my friend Neferah and she can purr!"

"Quoh, hosh muoa bath ho-neg. Pher-quoh nom gar-rouph, shen Neferah B'Tziah ho-neglah."

"Nom troak gar-alom. Fra shalohaem."

"Hey!"

"Come on, Jenn have you never heard Tzian before?"

"No. I didn't even know they spoke anything else."

"Well, you have now. . . ."

"Well Jenn, how was your blind date?"

"I'm in love! I'm in love. Oh, God, I'm in love!"

"In love, yes, but did you have a good time and did you wear clean underwear?"

"I'm in love, in love, in love. . . ."

"I have to leave now, Jenn. I have to report to my ship. Did you hear me, Jenn?"

"Yes."

"I won't be back for a long time. We are moving out to our positions on the outer rim. Jenn, I'm sorry for everything. I want you to know that I love you and our little Myrnah. I never stopped loving you. . . ."

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

"Are you Sister Jennanine B'Mesziah?"

"Yes. Is something wrong?"

"May we come in and speak to you for a moment?"

"Yes, but what is this about?"

"Sister Jennanine, I'm very sorry to inform you that."

"Aren't you a member of our Nashramh Sisterhood, Jenn?"

"Well yes, but I didn't mean that, my Grace. . . ."

"You are to be separated from our sisterhood immediately and transported to a place of our choosing, where you will remain for the rest of your days. This is my judgment and there is no recourse to any higher authority in this matter. May you go in peace, Jenn, and may you learn from your exile. . . ."

"Hello. My name is Neff. Who are you?"

One by one the faces appeared and disappeared, some of whom she hadn't seen since she was a child. Time ceased to exist while the faces and events seemed to be happening right now, almost as if she was living with them again. From time to time, she would see Neff sitting next to her, or darting and fluttering around over her head, keeping vigil. Jenn knew she was dying, but for some reason, it didn't matter. In fact, she welcomed it. When she closed her

eyes, she could see the faces of her friends smiling at her and she felt like she was back with them all again. Everything seemed to blend together so she lost all track of what was reality and what was a dream. In the distance, she could hear the flutter of Neff's wings overhead.

This last day of Jenn's life was marked by the arrival of two off-world visitors. One was an older woman wearing a grey uniform while the other was younger and dressed in brown.

Sister Noel Commoel stayed outside the cottage by the door and engaged the elves there in a bright and happy conversation about Jenn and her life on Mesziah. They were all excited about the prospect of her long sleep and her expected rebirth as a new baby in the neighborhood. When Noel asked how it was they knew Jenn was going to be reborn in their neighborhood, they all chimed in.

"Why, everybody knows that! After all, the faeries have said so, and that's how we know. The faeries know all about this kind of thing. Isn't it wonderful?"

"We hope you and your friend can stay with us for awhile, after we say good-bye to Jenn from the Stars," a voice spoke out from the crowd. "We'll give a party in your honor before you leave us, isn't that a fine idea?" Everybody nodded in agreement.

"Since you're both from the stars like Jenn," another small voice from the crowd chirped out, "I just bet you have lots of wonderful and interesting stories to tell us. Do stay with us for awhile and we'll tell you all sorts of our best stories." All of the elves thought that this was a fine idea. Yes, indeed!

Noel smiled at the happy group of elves looking up at her. She'd heard a great deal of this lovely world, Mesziah, and the little people who lived here. She'd thought the stories about them were exaggerated, but now she was beginning to believe them.

Sister-Magum Batdor Zell sat next to Jenn as she labored for breath. Neff was standing on the pillow next to Jenn patting her brow. Zell and Neff had talked together for a long time before this moment and now Zell addressed Jenn who was looking very old and frail.

"Jenn," she whispered, her lavender eyes glowing. "Look at my face and know who I am."

Jenn tried to focus on the strange woman's features, then she began to make out Raphael's image and at the same time she could see Miriam.

"We told you that you'd never be alone again, Jenn. We've been with you all the time and we always will. Your wonderful friend, Neff, and all your neighbors love you, Jenn, and now you can rest for awhile. We'll both be with you when you're asleep . . . now close your eyes . . . and be at peace."

Jenn closed her eyes and her breathing stopped. She'd passed out of her frail body and was now at rest until it was time to return. Neff smiled to herself. She knew Jenn was coming back and she'd be here waiting. She knew.

Sister-Magum Batdor Zell spoke the ancient words, as she stroked Jenn's face: "Hear O'Daughters of Compassionate Justice, the Eternal our. . . ."

The elves and faeries prepared a lovely wicker basket for Jenn's burial and lined it with bright flowers. Everybody had something nice to say about her and all were sad that she had to leave so soon. But, then, she would come back and be with them again. There was no doubt about it.

* * *

". . . Creator, the Eternal is one." Raphael recited the ancient words along with Batdor Zell. He could see Jenn's now quiet face through Zell's eyes and feel her cool skin through Zell's sensitive fingertips. This time he'd been able to be with Jenn when it really counted, and he felt good about it. She would rest for awhile, and then be reborn there among the Low Elves in the Enchanted Forest that she loved so much. Every facet of his complex personality loved Jenn more than words could express, and old Miriam alone felt a certain joy for her now that only the faeries could comprehend.

The two Nashramh sisters left three days after Jenn was buried under a lovely rose bush. Batdor Zell planted a ginger root in the soft ground over her head as a symbol of their eternal sisterhood; the ginger and the rose.

Chapter 20

Dove

Love has many hidden dimensions, and sometimes we don't see the obvious ones. . . .

08:00-11 MAREN 8982-7N5

Raphael collected his recording crystals and checked to make sure they were all accounted for. This had been a long, tiring assignment and he was glad to be leaving this backward planet. There was no question that the local inhabitants could mature into a civilized consortium of compatible and peaceful races in time. He determined, from their physical and psychological makeup, that they were capable of advancing technologically within the next few thousand years. As to becoming compatible and peaceful, well, that might take another 10,000 or 20,000 years at best. There was no question they were emotionally immature and unstable, and this factor would determine the course of their future more than the inclusion of 30,000,000 secret colonists in their midst who would both learn from them and teach them something about being civilized.

Raphael really felt sorry for the colonists who'd have to remain here for nearly 4,000 years. The first 2,000 year phase, with the pioneers, hadn't done much to change things, and now that Belial's legions had arrived, it looked like an uphill struggle all the way.

Raphael's last act before leaving this planet was to take part in the destruction of the underground city which the enemy had built high in the mountains of the southern continent in the south-

western hemisphere. Although the enemy was taken completely by surprise, they'd fought to the last man before self-destructing their city. The Ansharim had hoped to take most, if not all, of the enemy forces prisoner in their surprise attack, but were frustrated in their attempts by the sheer ferocity and determination of the trapped defenders. Unfortunately, neither of the other two hidden cities in the northeastern hemisphere had yet been detected.

Another off-world controlled base was also destroyed by a thermal-nuclear explosion south and east of the Ansharim's buried base. In this case neither the black ones nor the Ansharim were involved. In fact the facility was one of the last holdouts of the Anun-Tek Trans-Binary Mining Consortium on this world. Their consortium rival for mineral exploitation, Shar-Shugi Binary-Operations League, settled the issue with the bombing raid. Fortunately, Ansharim agents learned of the impending attack and warned Roydel's people living in the area to leave before hostilities began.

Mirisca had been gone for several centuries now, but she'd left her house in order and her successors were in firm control. They were referred to, by the colonists, as the 'Women of the Tent', and 'Daughters of Judgment', since their identities and whereabouts were always left in doubt. Their primary function was to guard the Well of the Guardian Women, which was hidden in a temple built under a mountain far to the southeast of their base.

Jenn died the year before, and Raphael felt happy that she lived so long on Mesziah with her little elfin friends. At least her experiences there, which he'd shared, were happy and carefree. In fact, they helped him keep a sense of proportion while on this assignment and to prevent him from becoming discouraged and bitter. There was so much potential here, except for the ingrained superstitious demeanor of the general population that stubbornly idolized ignorance and defended it with unspeakable violence among them. It was like being on Lublinog all over again.

Maya stepped through the door and walked to the couch across from Raphael's desk. Sitting down, she turned and poured herself a glass of green liqueur. Leaning back, she studied him as if he were hiding something.

He glanced over at the aging woman, and noticed her skin was no longer soot black, but was greying and blotching with blue flake-like calluses. Her oversized almond eyes still had a shine to

them, but they weren't as alert and bright as just a few years ago. Clearly she was much older than she admitted, and her days here were over. Now she was waiting to see what he had in mind for her, and he found it odd to have her wait passively for someone else's orders. It just wasn't like her. It certainly seemed strange that both Council Central and the RAD personnel section hadn't informed her or Akhem about their next assignment although they were no longer effective here on this crude planet. Raphael wished he could offer some good news, but there wasn't any.

"So, it looks like you'll be leaving today and going back to civilization," Maya toned hoarsely, her tired voice cracking as she spoke. "I've been honored to serve with you in this dangerous and important assignment, Raphael, and both I and Akhem will miss you when you leave."

Raphael did not respond to her, but nodded thoughtfully as he continued to check his crystal chips.

"Will you join us for a cordial drink together before you leave, Raphael? I would . . . we would be honored by your spending a short time with us."

"Yes I will, Maya. I'll be most honored."

"Would lunch at 11:00 hours be all right?"

"Certainly, thank you," he smiled at her.

With this, Maya finished her liqueur and set her glass down. "I'll look forward to having lunch and a drink with you, my dear friend," she said hoarsely as she got up and walked to the door. "Eleven hundred hours in the lounge?"

"Yes."

After Maya left, Raphael finished counting his record crystals and sat back to think. After all of these years, the two of them hadn't really gotten to know one another. Their first meeting and discussion about Jenn hadn't been repeated, and Maya's three rare smiles were all he'd seen. After their first month together, it was all business, and she never let her guard down. Akhem was easier to get acquainted with, but he too was all business. Still, Raphael felt close to both of them and didn't like the idea of leaving them here on this thankless world.

"Whoever said you were going to leave them here?" A man's voice sounded in Raphael's inner mind. "Both Myrnah and Ben-Calo that is, Maya and Akhem will accompany you to our RAD station and serve out their final assignments here."

"That makes sense," Raphael thought to himself. "You people are just like our Nashramh, always waiting until the last moment to make your assignments."

"It's a reasonable practice, is it not, friend Raphael?"

"Yes, it is."

When he'd disclosed the orders to Maya and Akhem, they were overjoyed. The very fact that he'd called them by their true names, of Myrnah and Ben-Calo, left no doubt he spoke for both the Nashramh and Ansharim. They terminated their lunch and excused themselves to prepare for disembarkation in three hours time. Myrnah smiled again for the first time in several centuries. Raphael suspected she would smile again and often.

* * *

Every day was a trying experience for Telly. He was always tired and slept more, although he still felt tired when he awoke. Each morning he went through his regular work schedule for a few hours, then, felt the urge to lie down and sleep, or rather to dream.

They were all dead and gone now, all of his pathfinder team; Lam Buce, Vuera Cognel, Dyson Yokan, Mattice Izel, Liskel Faalen, Moskall Rakon, and Dove Konissah. He knew Neferah died back in 8406-7N5. He'd actually felt her passing; at least he thought so. All of them, except for Neferah, had literally been prisoners most of their lives, even though they were considered to be on special assignments. Every agent from Adam Belial's vast legions of black infiltrators had pictures and G.C.C. personnel sheets on each of the pathfinders and orders to bring them in alive, and that made any place they were a prison.

Their mission to capture Meseosargon alive was the crowning success of their pathfinder's career, but also the last one. Now they were hunted everywhere by a tireless enemy who never gave up for a moment. The gangsters who'd kidnapped their god would be captured and brought to Sargon's righteous justice! In this last respect, the black ones were out of luck; only Telly was still alive, and even that wouldn't be for long. He too would soon die of old age, just like the others. Thank God the Legions of Light didn't know about how their Necro-Classic Authorities, or the crystals which housed human gamma-complexes, worked. At least Telly was led to understand they didn't know these secrets. Once each pathfinder died, and was later assigned a new body, he or she

couldn't be found. The enemy didn't know this and would continue searching for them, since they never gave up.

Whatever the case was for Adam Belial's relentless hunters, Telly felt they'd succeeded in imprisoning him for life. Now that he was near death, an order for him to be reassigned to a new project had just arrived. He was to be visited by an agent of the Ansharim who would brief him on his new assignment, whatever it could possibly be.

While he waited, Telly leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, visualizing his little Dove. God! He missed her now! She'd been right when she nearly mutinied the day they received their orders to go into limbo on a Nashramh RAD station. But then she'd changed too . . . in more than one way. She'd become a Nashramh novice just before she died 145 years ago.

Dove hadn't looked him straight in the eye for two weeks before her death and it still disturbed him to think about it. They'd been talking and then she'd changed. Yes, it was the conversation about binaries that changed everything.

"You know, Tel, I've been talking to a friend of mine who tells me there's a way for two people, who are very close, to remain together, for believe it or not, eternity. It's called a binary marriage, but it's different from a regular marriage in that you don't part at death."

"I know. I entered into a binary marriage with Neferah a few years before she died back in 8406-7N5. It's called a binary-extended."

"Oh? I didn't know anything about that," her voice dropped.

"That's because I was told not to divulge the fact to anyone by the Necro-Classic people. It's supposed to be a sisterhood secret and they don't want us to discuss it."

"Yes, that makes sense. The less it's discussed the better for security."

Telly hadn't thought about the short conversation until just after Dove died. Then he'd felt like hell about it. It had never occurred to him that she was proposing a binary marriage with him . . . in fact; he did not realize how much she loved him. Now it was too late to say the words he so desperately wanted to say to her . . . he loved her more than she could possibly know.

He thought back to the morning he'd awakened to discover her lying dead next to him. She had died quietly in her sleep without

waking him. She'd been much more than his lover, for she was truly his best friend and companion. Now he found emptiness in his life that couldn't be filled by anybody else. God, he missed her sense of humor and warm presence beside him. Now he was lonely in the midst of a crowd of associates and really didn't mind the prospect of dying.

"It's good to meet you, Lieutenant B'Mesziah," the heavyset man, with deep piercing eyes, toned as the two shook hands. "I see you've received our communication."

"Yes. I've read it over, but there doesn't appear to be any substance to it."

"Oh, there's no reason to make a technical document out of our proposal to reassign you to a field position, Lieutenant. It's our practice to make all arrangements on a face-to-face basis so there are no misunderstandings. By the way, I'm Brother Ben-Froko of the Ansharim Brotherhood, and my associate, here, is Sister Jellard Quael of the Nashramh's security group's Necro-Classic Authority."

A lean, grey-skinned woman shook Telly's hand and nodded. She didn't speak.

"Now, shall we all sit down and get along with our business? We have a lot of ground to cover," Ben-Froko toned.

Ben-Froko dominated the conversation while Sister Jellard sat silently at his side. He outlined the Ansharim's outer rim seeding project, in which the Nashramh had been participating since the Great Conflagration, and spoke about the enemy's change in overall strategy. He then went on to describe the situation on various planets on which the special colonists were already seeded, and the various problems inherent in their tenure there.

"You see, Lieutenant, our various groups of colonists are mixed populations from different worlds and cultures that are, we believe, ultimately compatible. In addition to the regular line of symbiotic races who're inexperienced in off-world situations, we've infused G.C.C. military personnel along with various kinds of criminals serving penal obligations, and some specialized oversight, or Necro-Classic agents from the Nashramh."

"Just a moment, here," Telly interjected. "Did I hear you correctly? Various kinds of criminals serving penal obligations are being mixed with your colonists out in the field?"

"That's right. Strange as it may seem, we've found that their presence isn't detrimental to our goals, and it's a very good way to help them learn vital lessons. Let me note here, that these people, whether criminal or not, are each volunteers with a specific job to do. The only real difference between the regular colonists and those who are serving penal obligations is their Necro-Classic status. The regular colonists and military people are each paired in special ethereal-binary-units with a member of their opposite sex, to which they return when their temporal bodies are abandoned. Thus, while they're in their corporeal forms, they are individuals in exile, but when they die, they reunite into binary-units. Those who are serving penal obligations aren't introduced into any kind of binary arrangement, but remain in exile both in the ethereal, and in the temporal. They're not receiving any rewards or protections they haven't earned by demonstrated actions over a long period of time. They all know what their rewards will be, if and when they straighten their acts out. If not, they know it is back to the same old curtailments until they've gotten the experience to develop into civilized human beings."

"You mentioned before that you don't hold much hope for the growth of the primitive populations on these rim-worlds. Does that mean you intend to abandon them when the colonial period is over?"

"Good question, but no. There are vast problems with those peoples on the rimworlds that we didn't cause, and which we're relatively powerless to resolve. That doesn't mean we're not trying to civilize their populations; that is, show them the basic models of reason and compassion to offset their superstitious dogmas and blind obedience to herd instincts. We can't deal with these primitive imperatives as problems, which would imply there are solutions to them. Instead, we consider them as conditions which will change in time."

"Aren't we responsible for their guidance and the ultimate outcome of their condition, as you call it, since we're interfering with their internal affairs?"

"We do have responsibilities, but they're not infinite. Our presence on the outer rimworlds is twofold and not to be confused with social or cultural engineering. We're there to establish a military presence to ward off the forces of Adam Belial who are presently infiltrating the area in great numbers. We are also laying

the foundations for bringing these areas into the sway of the G.C.C. Rimworld Proctorate, and as such we will maintain a viable military presence there until the enemy has been checked or beaten. Our resources are limited, as are all things, but we are willing to expend them in areas where the rimworld populations are totally incapable of doing so themselves. But we are not committed to filling in gaps they're capable of, and should make for themselves. We're not gods, only older peoples who will share our best knowledge and experience with newer cultures where and when they can accept it."

"That makes sense. Well, how do I fit in? I'm a bit old to be an effective soldier, you know." Telly smiled.

"Oh, we're well aware that you're due to die within the next few years, Lieutenant. That's why we're approaching you now. You will, if you agree, be reborn into another kind of human body which will live a bit longer than the type you have now. Then you'll serve as an observer of our colonial efforts on one or more rimworlds."

"I see no problem to that," Telly nodded.

"Well, there is one small problem," Ben-Froko smiled. "You must be a binary-two to serve in this capacity. We've learned through long experience that this is necessary for the protection of our special field personnel, so they're able to remember their mission goals in detail and not be subjected to an enforced exile on alien planets."

"I've already been brought into a binary-extended arrangement with Neferah B'Tziah who's a Sister Proper in the Nashramh. We could have the marriage changed into a binary-two if one of us is incorporeal, or after I die."

"No! That's forbidden!" Sister Jellard spoke out. "Council Central has expressly forbidden a close binary marriage between the two of you until such time as you have already entered into a binary-two arrangement with another woman."

"Why is that?" Telly looked up in surprise.

"Because Sister B'Tziah is already a binary-two and has an overwhelming personality that you can't cope with alone. You will be allowed to come together only when you are both ready for such a union."

"Are there any other Nashramh women whom you have loved and feel close enough to form an eternal marriage, Lieutenant?" Ben-Froko interjected.

"Yes. I've been very close to two wonderful Nashramh women besides Neferah. One, Chevoni B'Seraph, is already a complex binary. The other joined the Nashramh shortly before she died 145 years ago; her name is Dove Konissah."

"Then it's all settled," Ben-Froko exclaimed, looking over at Sister Jellard. "Your young novice, Dove Konissah, expressed a desire to be united with this man. There will be no objections from your authority, will there?"

"None," Jellard answered softly.

"Welcome to our field operations group, Lieutenant Telakin B'Mesziah, of the Nashramh Sisterhood." Ben-Froko shook Telly's hand again. "It's time to get moving now."

"When will this binary-marriage take place?" Telly asked, "I take it you want to begin before I die."

"We'll perform the procedure now, Telakin B'Mesziah. So if you'll kindly lie down on your cot and relax, I'll begin the process."

Telly knew from experience that the procedure was strangely simple, but he was taken by surprise by their rapid decision to perform the binary-marriage. Still, it didn't matter because he really wanted to be together with Dove, and the sooner it took place the better.

Chapter 21

Judgment

We are all responsible for our actions in this contradictory temporal existence . . . and none can escape judgment for infractions of the rules. What are the rules? You and I both know them well . . . for they are ingrained in the fabric of our conscience . . . and our conscience is a fundamental part of our immortal soul. . . .

01:16-30 NOAIM 9002-7N5

Stars, distant sparks of frozen light amid faint clouds of shimmering matter, penetrating the velvet infinity of the lonely void, constituted his only touch with a distant reality. He had watched the luminous pinpricks of stars for as long as he could remember while fleeting memories of gossamer faces and odd wispy forms, as yet intangible, coursed through his frozen consciousness and mingled with the far away constellations of sparkling matter. On and on, he watched and waited, unaware he was either watching or waiting, and unaware he even existed as anything other than a figment of those gossamer images and pinpricks of light. He was unaware of anything other than his faint dreams and the eternal cold.

Now, a compulsive drawing touched at his very being, gently at first, then increasing steadily with a compelling sense of urgency. Then, as if a thick veil had been placed over his faint vision, he experienced nothing but absolute darkness.

The terrible, deep, coldness permeating his consciousness slowly dimmed into a new sensation of being. Yes, a dim feeling of being and of dawning awareness. He sensed sounds of movement

around him rather than actually hearing them and felt a sense of expectation. His mind began to clear, as if awakening from a very long sleep, and after what seemed to be an eternity of gradual change, the tall dark-haired man began to stir. In disjointed lapses of time, he opened his eyes, rose unsteadily to his feet, and looked around apprehensively.

He stood alone in a dull grey room empty of any furniture other than the low white cot on which he had just awakened. To his left, a door appeared out of nowhere disclosing a long grey-lit hall.

Moving cautiously, the tall man made his way through the door and walked slowly down the empty hall, coldly alert for the frightening and unknown. To his left, a dark grey-black door came into sight, about five meters ahead of him. Cold chills shot up his spine and he visibly recoiled from the silent evil, for everything about it was alien and threatening to his senses.

Quickening his pace, he bolted past the ominous black portal. A feeling of cold terror seemed to follow him along the dimly lit passage as if something alien and menacing would reach out and drag him back to an uncertain fate. He hadn't as yet recovered from his chilling experience when he approached two new doors, each facing the other across the narrow hall. Controlling his emotions, he briefly examined them.

He knew he had to make a choice, but for a moment he wasn't sure which one to go through. He didn't know where he was or what awaited him behind either of the two doors.

One was a softly glowing gold door with a bright silver-white marbling coursing its surface. The other was a milky grey-white. Moving more on instinct than reason, the man stepped over to the grey-white door, to his right, and pushed against it. The odd door opened without effort, and he found himself in a brightly lit room with a single couch situated in its center. Behind the couch he noticed a softly shimmering grey mirror. He had no idea why he'd entered through the grey-white door, but now that he was here it felt right.

By some compulsion, the man walked over to the grey mirror. Looking at the reflection in the shimmering surface, he dimly recognized his features as being human, although they were burned and his right arm was twisted at a strange angle. Funny, he now realized he was looking at his own wounded body and that he hadn't noticed the burns before, nor did they hurt. Using his

left hand, he gingerly touched the burned tissue on his face and shoulders, but again felt no sense of pain. His skin had a lifeless, waxy texture to it and he began to feel uneasy as he stared silently at his own familiar reflection. When he moved his arms and legs, he noticed there wasn't any sense of weight or substance to them.

Something was definitely wrong. Something he couldn't put his finger on. He pondered his image in the grey mirror for awhile and tried to figure out who he was, and what would happen next.

The grey mirror shimmered slightly to his right, as if becoming briefly distorted by something unseen.

Startled, he turned to find a young woman standing next to him. She wore a form-fitting white nurse's uniform that accentuated her ample figure. Her eyes were bright blue and her hair a lovely flaxen blonde. She was the most beautiful creature he could possibly imagine and he began to wonder if he was dreaming.

"What the . . . ?" he started, suddenly surprised by the sound of his own voice.

"Good morning, Captain," she said, smiling warmly. "Did I startle you?"

"Why, yes," he replied, bowing slightly. "I'm afraid I don't know where I am, and you did startle me."

"My name is Sister Henitta Shounoux and I'm your physical therapist from Section Seven of the Sub-Group IV Combat Rehabilitation Hospital. You took quite a beating awhile back and I'm here to help you out. Now, my dear, why don't you lay down on this couch so I can take a look at you," the last held a subtle note of command.

Not knowing what else to do, he carefully positioned himself on the couch, so he faced the grey ceiling. As he adjusted himself to the couch's contours, the lovely blonde woman leaned over him and began to examine his burned flesh while gently stroking his face and broken arm. Her full, rounded breasts brushed against his shoulder and the very softness of her scented breath excited him, causing his loins to come alive with a newfound sensation. Stiffening his body and exercising all of the self-discipline he could muster, the wounded man fought to control his overpowering sexual emotions. "Oh God!" he thought, "What's she doing to me?"

"Well now, Captain," she smiled again. "I think that will about do it. You're as good as new." She seemed oblivious to his reactions

as she continued smoothly. "Now, my friend, if you will just go through that door over there, you can be on your way." Then without another word, she turned and left through another door which he couldn't actually discern to be there. Had she even been there?

Shaking his head in confusion, the man stood up, wondering just what the hell was going on . . . Captain who? What was he a captain of anyway? Stepping over to the glowing mirror, he found a handsome face looking back at him. The tan face had a dark moustache, nearly black eyes and hair, and delicately pointed ears. The burned flesh was gone and the broken arm was repaired.

Now this was crazy; how in hell did she do that? It suddenly occurred to him that he was naked, and this too was strange since he hadn't realized it before.

He looked over at the door she'd indicated and walked cautiously over to it, flexing his newly healed arm which now had a warm and good feeling to it. He made his way through the new door which opened and closed automatically for him.

This new room was completely empty except for a glowing red wall which acted as a mirror, but wasn't. Silently, a rippling image began to slowly appear on the glowing red surface which, in turn, softened into a pinkish, then milky white. It was Captain Scoon.

"My God, it's . . . Scoon!" His eyes staring, Captain Scoon sat back in his command chair, a gaping red hole puncturing his environmental uniform. Suddenly a rush of memories surfaced in Neftalak's mind and he remembered everything, including the death of the Job and his attack on the enemy battleship. Slowly, the scene began to change again and again, recalling vivid memories of the past as Captain-Navigator Neftalak B'Meszhiah of the G.C.C. lead destroyer Lisboor relived every moment of his life.

Everything seemed to go by quickly as he stood watching the shimmering mirror. As he viewed each segment of his life, he wanted to slow it down and study each event. It was strange to be an observer watching himself and remembering his past experiences at the same time. Finally he was able to focus in on one particular moment.

"Please Mommy, don't go away! Please don't go away!" he screamed, tears rolling down his thin cheeks, "mommy! Don't go!"

His mother was being led out of the large room, her soft eyes shiny and glassy, and when he'd tried to run after her, he'd been

held back. Only after many years did Neftalak realize his beautiful mother had been heavily sedated that terrible day; otherwise she could never have parted from her little son without completely breaking down. He'd never forgiven those tall grey women who had taken her from him.

That had been so long ago! Yet, now it seemed as if it was only yesterday, and he felt tears trickle at the corners of his eyes. Oh, God! He loved his beautiful soft mother and remembered her musical voice and tinkly little laugh. Next to Souphieah and Jenn, she was the only woman he truly loved. He remembered her name was Myrnah B'Meszhiah, but he'd never known his father or his name.

Without control, Neftalak's memories coursed around each episode and moment of his life from his childhood through his marriage to Jenn and culminated with his last moments aboard the Lisboor. Finally, his memories became less clear and were clouded by conflicting images and a growing darkness touched only by luminous clouds of stars and gossamer shapes of faces.

His perspective of how and when events actually happened became cloudy. He would see the familiar faces of people he remembered put together with incidents he knew hadn't occurred at the same time period he saw depicted. He would see Jenn, together with Souphieah, as he remembered them, but they somehow looked different and the incidents were mixed up. Then he would see his mother's face along with Jenn and Souphieah. It didn't make any sense to him and he wondered whether or not they had known one another at some far-off time. He could remember each of them at different times, although the exact periods overlapped as if time didn't matter here; wherever here was.

Then, almost as if a switch had been turned, his perceptions changed and he found himself standing alone. He stared out from a long stone apron below high jutting cliffs skirting an endlessly rolling deep blue-green ocean.

The intermingling sounds of both the wind and waves created a symphony of splendid music which flowed over the nearly deserted beach and engulfed his very senses.

"Oh, it has been such a very long time since I've been here. I'd forgotten how beautiful it really is."

He listened to the waves as they splashed along the beach and enjoyed the fragrant scents that permeated the briny air. Now he remembered! He'd stood on this beach and made the decision that changed the course of his life forever. He found himself standing here again and reliving everything.

Now it was time for him to make his decision. He had always known the answer, for as a young man long ago before he came here to meditate on his fate, he'd been told he had a special mark on his soul; a mark that was pointed towards the stars. Now the time had finally arrived. He would be leaving for those far away stars . . . stars he'd never seen because of Mesziah's heavy atmosphere which hid them from view, even from the highest mountaintops. The rolling waves moved steadily along the hard grey shore and their thunderous pounding music brought tears to Neftalak's eyes. He knew now that he would never again see these beautiful shores nor ever hear the wondrous voices of his world's churning nature, for the die was cast and he was leaving forever.

Turning slowly, his head bowed, Neftalak began his climb up the rough apron to his lodge hidden high among the jagged grey cliffs. Just above him, about six meters distant, a lone figure stood silently in the billowing breeze. Souphieah, his wife for most of his adult life, stood quietly with her thin robes fluttering in the wind. She stared out toward the ever rolling sea, deep in meditation. Stopping next to her still figure, Neftalak turned and placed his arm around her stooped shoulders, and together, they faced the beautiful sea. They had been married for as long as he could remember, now more than 800 years, and he still really didn't know her . . . his lovely Souphieah.

It had been such a wonderful trip, one that anyone who was ever in love dreamed of. Their wedding party made its way down from the high mountains, with everyone's friends and relatives joining of course. They'd traveled across expansive forests and grasslands, which were so varied and teeming with life that he couldn't remember them in detail. Finally they'd arrived at the beautiful and misty 'Enchanted Forest' of the Low Elves and Winged Faeries. Neftalak could still remember when he'd first seen it. In the twilight, a soft greenish glow seemed to emanate from beneath the distant, towering trees.

"Oh, Talaki," Souphieah whispered, "have you ever seen anything so wonderful?"

Souphieah was a lovely girl of sixteen, with green-black hair and emerald eyes that glowed with excitement. It was then he realized the glowing mists were the same color as her beautiful eyes. He nodded silently and squeezed her hand, too full of love and awe to say anything.

The Enchanted Forest was a mysterious place without darkness where everything glowed even after the sun set. Beautiful red, blue and green mosses covered everything while lush flowers and fruits grew everywhere. The misty air was filled by the tinkling sounds of splashing waters which came from both hidden springs and slowly winding white rivers that ran through the low delta valley. There wasn't anything as clear and fragrant as the waters running through the Enchanted Forest; nowhere else on this lovely world except in these low lying misty river deltas.

Even as he stared in delight that transcended words, he'd been surprised to realize how many people his wedding party had picked up along the way. There were hundreds of High Elves from the great mountains, some of whom were relatives, and there were literally thousands of Middle Elves from the broad grasslands and forests who had joined in because they loved a good party. Only the funny little Low Elves seemed to be few in number. Later, he found they were really everywhere, but they always hid behind bushes and mosses because they were very shy. But, they were not too shy to join in on the festivities.

Then there were the Winged Faeries. They were everywhere. All shapes and sizes of these lovely, glowing little creatures all tinkled with laughter and happy conversations. None ever seemed to listen to the other, since all appeared to be gaily chirping and talking at once.

Neftalak had never seen many of these small winged creatures in the mountains or by the sea, and he'd encountered those few only seen in passing.

He shook his head with amazement as the great party moved deeper into the shimmering forest, finally reaching a wide clearing next to a crystal-clear stream. There were faeries and elves everywhere, all fluttering around without any sense of purpose.

With all this happy activity, it seemed nothing would ever get done. But, after only a short time, long tables appeared as if out of nowhere. Piles of fruit, small dishes and glasses of exotic food, candies, and juices were brought together from all quarters. This

was going to be a big party, one that would be remembered by one and all!

Neftalak could never really remember the exact details of what happened next, since it was over in a brief instant. He and his lovely Souphieah were standing together under a beautifully set hanging floral arrangement that someone thoughtfully placed next to their table. They talked quietly together as they enjoyed the merry festivities and were awaiting an old woman who was to officiate at their wedding ceremony.

"You, my dear Talaki, have the mark of a traveler among the stars imprinted on your soul," the little voice spoke out clearly.

Both he and Souphieah looked away from each other and stared at the lovely little winged faerie as she hovered in the air in front of them.

"I'm sorry," he began, "but I don't think I heard what it was you said."

"Oh, you heard me well enough, my young friend," the little tinkling voice responded. "You are of a special kind and will one day travel among the stars in the heavens above us, and you are destined to live alone among strangers for untold centuries as yet unborn. Your marriage to lovely Souphieah will be a long and happy one, and it will only come about in your dawning days that you will be told of your weighty quest."

"But . . . I don't even know what stars are," the dumbfounded young man began. He didn't see Souphieah's eyes brighten as she blinked back sudden tears and nodded silently to herself.

"That is true, Talaki, but you do know about their existence just as you know of our lovely sun which you have never seen. But you know that it gives us light and warmth and you know also of our misty moon, Nesziah, from which I and my kind have come. One day you will see both from another place which is far above the clouds of our beautiful Mesziah. Now, I shall give you my first present, which is my name. It will be joined together with yours to help you remember who and what you really are throughout the lonely ages to come. My name is 'Neff' and, joined together with your name 'Talaki', it will become your new, eternal, name . . . never to change . . . and you shall be known from this moment forward as 'Neftalak'. You shall be a friend to the faeries wherever you encounter us."

"I . . . I don't know what to say . . ." he trailed off. How could she know these things, and what did they mean?

"There is nothing to say, my dear young Neftalak," she continued, "and my second gift is to both of you since I will be the one to officiate at your wedding ceremony." Noticing Souphieah's glistening eyes, the faerie nodded and continued. "This ceremony will signify the special nature of your love and marriage for you is both destined for responsibilities beyond the clouds of our heavens. Your life together will be the last truly peaceful existence either of you shall know for millennia to come."

The deep blue-green waves continued to roll as Souphieah and Neftalak each reflected on their innermost memories and feelings. They'd been married by the lovely faerie Neff and their wedding party was a wonderful time to remember. There had been much singing, dancing and storytelling. When the other members of the wedding party heard that Talaki, now Neftalak was a friend to the faeries and he was to travel to the far-off stars, they cheered and sang happy songs of joy and celebration to the event. After all, anything the faeries had to say must be true, or they wouldn't say it!

There was only one other episode Neftalak remembered from that happy party. There was a tiny Low Elf child who was so small that she couldn't quite reach above the table top where all of the fruit and nuts were piled. Neftalak, seeing her plight, reached over and handed her the finest red fruit on the table. She shyly accepted it, giggling, then scampered off to the bushes where she shared it with her little friends. After that, he noticed her peeking around leaves and mosses, following his every movement. Her eyes were of such a dark blue, almost black, and they shone with an admiration bordering on love.

On and on Neftalak relived his lives for what seemed to have been forever. Finally, the screen in front of him changed back to a pink then a ruby red glow.

He realized that he was breathing harshly. Now he knew who and what he really was with a painful clarity that shook him to his very core. Before he could fully recover, a door on the far wall slid open. Neftalak nearly stumbled through it into a large room filled with thousands of uniformed people. Absentmindedly he noticed he was now dressed in his combat environmental uniform. Funny, when had he put it on?

He was clearly shaken from his experience and surprised to find himself confronted by Captain Scoon.

"Neftalak," Scoon said softly under his breath, also appearing slightly disoriented although not without his usual calm. "Be careful and don't say anything to anyone about yourself or our military organization. I don't know where we are or who has us in custody, but believe me this place doesn't make sense."

"I agree," Neftalak replied. "You wouldn't believe my recent experiences even if you had been with me."

"I know, I know," Scoon whispered. "You cover this set of doors and caution any of our crew members who come through, and take note of those who aren't from our ship. I think there are some here from the Harrip and possibly from the Job."

Then, acting as if nothing had been said, Captain Scoon casually turned and walked off into the crowd. Neftalak looked around at the calmly quiet people; some were standing alone while others were clustered in small groups speaking together softly.

Nothing seemed real! Many of the faces were familiar although different from what he remembered . . . just how, he couldn't quite determine . . . something possibly in their calm expressions, or in the slightly sluggish way they moved . . . like animated manikins. God! This was crazy! Everything seemed like some insane dream that was almost real except missing an element. What was it?

"Captain-Navigator Neftalak B'Meszhah, service serial number G.C.C.88D416684883W, report to evaluation room number five," the loudspeaker called out above the voices of the crowd. It seemed odd to Neftalak that no one other than himself appeared to hear the announcement. Across the large room, a red lighted number five blinked on and off, beckoning to him. He moved through the stationary crowd automatically, without any conscious thought, as if drawn to the slowly blinking light. "My god, where am I going?" he murmured under his breath, a slow panic beginning to build up in his inner mind. In short order, he arrived at an open door just below the blinking red number and without hesitation, his body walked through it as his mind struggled to resist.

"Sit down, Captain," he heard an oddly dry voice command. He felt his body do as he was told, and moved to sit in a high-back chair in front of a long, wide table.

Three people sat placidly behind the white-topped marble table. One was a man and the other two were women. One of the

women's faces was obscured by what appeared to be a veil; the other two were normal-looking people who lacked distinguishing characteristics.

A door to his right opened and a heavysset man, wearing the combat environmental uniform of a senior officer, entered the room. Neftalak couldn't believe it! It was Commander Grore from G.C.C. Naval Intelligence, although now he wore the insignia of a vice-admiral.

"Remain seated, Captain," he stated flatly. "Do you recognize me?"

"Yes sir," Neftalak responded, noticing the man's familiar balding head with grey hair and his short, stocky build. "Only I thought that you were a commander, sir."

"That's right, Neftalak," Grore smiled. "You do know me, and I am a commander in Naval Intelligence. We just wanted to be sure we had the right Neftalak B'Meszhiah. I remember you too."

"How did you get here?" Neftalak asked, paying no attention to the other three.

"I was assigned to the lead heavy-cruiser 'Hobartel' in the XVI Battle Fleet's 16th forward attack wing," Grore responded. "As we broke into the temporal, out here on the rim, we were hit by an enemy salvo . . . we didn't even have a chance to return fire . . . not a single laser burst or torpedo canister. We came all this distance just to be blown to atoms as we broke into the temporal." Neftalak nodded. He almost felt the same way.

Grore noticed the expression on Neftalak's face. "You, my friend, did a hell of a lot better . . . a great deal better than you think. You'll find out about that, though, when you enter debriefing." He looked Neftalak straight in the eyes and continued, "Captain B'Meszhiah, you are to cooperate with our debriefing team completely . . . this is a direct order from G.C.C. Combined Fleet Admiralty . . . do you understand?"

"Yes I do Commander," Neftalak answered. "Is there anything I should know before I enter the debriefing?"

"Nothing, other than we neither won nor lost the battle. We only earned a breathing space in which to regroup and refit our fleets for larger battles to come." Neftalak was struck by serious implications of Grore's statement and the sudden realization that the invasion wasn't over.

"We need to know everything, no matter how insignificant it may seem to you and the others . . . anything we can use against the enemy to win. What you will be experiencing in this room, before you go into debriefing, is a personal evaluation process which each of us must pass through to be judged for our conduct and prepared for our next assignment. You'll find it interesting." And disarming, Grore added in his own mind, "but, good-bye for now." He then turned and left without further comment and the door closed silently behind him.

"We will begin with the first part of your evaluation process," the grey man behind the table stated flatly, reminding Neftalak that he wasn't alone. "Later, after debriefing, we will confer our judgments on you. Only your last temporal life will be dealt with during this evaluation, since your experiences on Mesziah are outside of our jurisdiction and of no real concern to us."

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, nor do I know who you are," Neftalak replied. "Just what am I to be judged for, and by whom?"

"That's a fair question," the woman, whose face he could see, said softly. "We are representatives of the 'Binary-Plane Triad Graves Registration and Necro-Classic Authority' for the Ansharim, Nashramh, and Consortium of Advanced Starset Galactic Governments. We are empowered by our consortium of governments to evaluate the temporal life experiences of our consigned citizens and military personnel, and to confer judgments and mete out disciplinary actions that may be warranted by gross misconduct. We are also responsible for future assignments and advancements as may be deserved by each person with respect to his or her personal learning process and individual merits. Is my answer clear, Neftalak? If not, I will elaborate further."

As a matter of fact, it wasn't. Furthermore, most of what the woman said meant absolutely nothing to him. Neftalak had never heard of this authority, but decided to wait and see what transpired before committing himself. But he decided to accept their answer for the time being.

"I don't have any questions at the moment," he affirmed.

The woman spoke again, this time listing specific items which included his conduct towards himself, his work and other people. The list continued on and he was surprised as to how much they knew about his personal conduct, especially the things he thought

were completely private. This made him feel almost ashamed and more than a little uncomfortable.

"We are not concerned about your personal thoughts on any matter, much less your fantasies, aspirations, or grudges," she said flatly after completing the long list of items. "We are only judging you on your overt conduct. That is, for those things which you brought into temporal reality by both word and deed. And by this we include those things which you caused to happen by purposeful omission."

Neftalak was shaken by the detailed information on the list. What was this place anyway? "How is that?" he spoke out, suddenly aware of the depth of this interview and its implications.

"By this, we mean there are two kinds of offenses against others for which you are held accountable. One is by far more serious than the other, to wit, the offenses of commission and of omission. Those things which you have committed are the ones which you can overtly be held accountable for and can explain or justify to some degree because you initiated the acts. On the other hand, how do you explain or justify something which you failed to do? Something which you can claim no responsibility for? Especially when it had a negative effect on another living being? That very question is the reason for our condemning the offense of omission more than one of overt commission."

Neftalak pursed his lips and considered this. "It seems you'd have to reach pretty far to prove I was guilty of omission," he answered thoughtfully.

"Not in the least, young man, we can easily conclude from the context of your actions and assertions exactly what your real intentions have been at any specific time. You are not in the least bit a mystery to us."

She went on to review Neftalak's promiscuous conduct towards women, his infidelity to his wife, and his many and varied shortcomings. She concluded with a detailed summary of his negative activities.

"Neftalak B'Meszhah, you have heard our list of merits and demerits pertaining to your character and conduct during the course of your temporal matrix-cycle which concluded with your physical death during the attack on Samael's black warship. This bill of particulars has been read to you and is the basic document by which you will be judged and your future assignment into a

temporal matrix-cycle determined. After you've completed your debriefing sessions, we will meet with you again and disclose our judgments."

"I don't recall you asking me to explain myself on any of the charges you've read," Neftalak spoke out. "I have a number of things to say on the matter."

"You have nothing to say on the matter, young man, since everything you have to offer has already been in effect in temporal time and space. You are only here to be informed of the bill of particulars concerning yourself and the rules by which we are to judge you. You may proceed to your next station for your fleet action debriefing. You are dismissed."

With that, a door to his right opened and Neftalak felt his body automatically rise to move towards it. He wanted to explain himself before leaving, but found he was walking out through the door before he had time to protest.

Commander Grore was waiting for him at the door and escorted him along a wide hall to another room.

"It's quite a shock to have a bill of particulars read out against you and not be able to respond to it, yes?" he said. "Well my boy, we all have to go through the same procedure, and there's no escape from it. But, then, don't worry about it. They're far fairer about such things than you or I would be."

Neftalak nodded, remaining silent, and shortly they entered the debriefing room and were met by Captain Scoon and all of the crew members from the Lisboor's bridge. Each section from the warship was apparently assembled into different debriefing groups and interrogated about the things they were specifically aware of. Everyone cooperated with Grore and a clear picture of what actually happened on the bridge came to light. As seen and experienced by each participant, the picture took on a different dimension and Grore was able to glean out discreet facts that escaped the others. As Neftalak watched and listened, he realized that Grore was really a master of combat intelligence and he appreciated the commander's professional approach to the complex subject.

After the debriefing session, which seemed to take forever, Neftalak was summoned back to the Graves Registration and Necro-Classic Authority hearing, as were the others. He found himself walking back along the same wide hall through which he'd

been escorted by Commander Grore and, not without serious misgivings, he entered the hearing room. The same three people were still seated where they'd been when he left earlier.

"Now you have completed your combat debriefing, Neftalak B'Mesziah, we are prepared to confer our judgments and decisions as stated to you previously. You have been weighed on a scale of one to 100 on each of 4,613 separate items."

Neftalak nodded dumbly, unable to respond and unsure as to what he would say if he could. In the midst of the grey woman's earlier explanation he had caught a brief glimpse of what seemed to be happening, but still could not help feeling this was more serious than he was able to understand. Suddenly he wished he could just go away and hide. But he couldn't, so he straightened, looked directly at the speaker, and listened without comment.

The woman went on to read each item and to enumerate the numerical value of each. All were extremely low and Neftalak felt ashamed of his poor conduct, which he had never really thought about before. He was given a value of two for marital fidelity, a 20 for bravery, and an overall average of 12.5.

"Now that we have disclosed our judgments on your conduct and demonstrated values during your last temporal matrix-cycle, Neftalak B'Mesziah, we must comment on your overall credit."

Neftalak remained silent, listening attentively. It was obvious to him that his meager contributions to human society and the G.C.C. navy weren't very impressive in the scheme of things and he had a great deal to learn.

The woman continued. "You've actually done well above average for a novice in the realm of grade three causative affairs. We've taken into consideration that your past temporal matrix-cycles have all been confined to the grade two, that is, a symbiotic realm of temporal reality, and you haven't been prepared for this past level as is normally the case with other races. You have much to learn about the causative universe and the operating values of good and evil, Neftalak B'Mesziah, and you've demonstrated that you're on the right path to learning its lessons."

This wasn't what he expected to hear. Neftalak didn't understand exactly what all this meant, but it certainly didn't sound as negative as he'd thought it would be.

"Your overall performance may appear exceedingly low to you, but it is, in fact, quite high for a novice. We will, therefore, consign

you to a new temporal matrix-cycle at the same socio-thematic level as you previously occupied. Therein you can reapproach your problems of personal values and conduct again within a similar context to which you have previously experienced. We will not assign you to your two repeat infra-cycles until you have completed this temporal experience, then you will be subject to the repeat phases for the two linear cycles before progressing further. This is our judgment and this is our decision, Neftalak B'Mesziah. You may now leave and rest until we've decided upon your next assignment phase of regeneration into temporal time and space. Have you anything to say before you are released?"

Neftalak stood at attention during this entire discourse and listened carefully to what was said. Many of the terms and ideas were new to him, but he'd been able to piece together what was said. He was aware he was new to experience outside of Mesziah's innocent society and values, and he had much to learn about himself and others, as well as the operating values of good and evil. He could forgive himself for making so many naive and foolish mistakes with people, situations, and things, but he couldn't forgive himself for cheating on Jenn.

"Yes, I would like to voice my feelings about my conduct towards my wife Jenn," he said barely above a whisper. "I have loved her ever since I first saw her, so long ago on Mesziah, and this last time when I found her and we were married. I cannot forgive myself for what I've done to her or to my two children, whom she bore for me, and I don't know what I can say or do to rectify my terrible infidelity towards her or them."

"You have already said and done what is necessary, Neftalak B'Mesziah," the woman sitting in the shadows spoke softly. Only her strange glowing eyes were visible. "You and Jenn are both destined to marry again in the distant future and to unite in an eternal binary through which you will be bound together forever. She is your 'true love' and holds no malice or sense of condemnation for you. She has only love for you, Neftalak, and when you have both matured through long temporal experience, you will be united in your eternal marriage."

Surprised by these words, Neftalak looked up. "Who are you and how do you know about my future and of Jenn?"

"I am Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah of the Nashramh Sisterhood's Council Central and I speak through the bio-gamma-

complex of another of my sisters. I will not disclose any of our secrets to you, Neftalak B'Meszhiah, but know you this. We recognize you as a friend of the faeries of Neszhiah and, despite your temporal attitudes towards us, we consider you to be our friend. Now go you in peace and tread carefully in the temporal time and space continuum."

With this, Neftalak, who was speechless, was dismissed from the room. He found himself being escorted by a tall lean man in a white orderly's uniform to another room which was furnished with a single low cot.

"You will sleep here, Captain B'Meszhiah, until we reach our destination. When we've arrived you'll be awakened."

"I don't understand," Neftalak said in disbelief. "How can I sleep when I am dead?"

"Dead?" the man smiled, "who said you were dead?"

"I am, aren't I?"

"No you are not! Your temporal body is dead, but not you!" the man stated firmly. "You are now in the real universe . . . the total universe is made up of four parts and we occupy all of them at the same time. You were in the ethereal-temporal complex occupying a corporeal bio-matrix. Now you're mostly in the ethereal portion of that complex since your body was destroyed. When you slept in your temporal body, you often dreamed in that dimension, but more often you were in this one. When you sleep now, you will also dream. But you will be experiencing the Beriatric dimension which is more abstract than the one we now dominantly occupy. You have much to learn, my friend, and you will in time."

With this, he helped Neftalak onto the low couch and placed his hand on Neftalak's brow. Within five seconds Captain Neftalak B'Meszhiah was asleep and again began to experience the dreams of gossamer faces and wispy shapes that he had known while lost out in the void.

The End

POSTSCRIPT

Every account of human events must have some sort of conclusion, if only a temporary respite between episodes . . . so let's conclude our journey with a meeting I attended back in JERIN 9433-7N5. . . .

28:30-10 JERIN 9433-7N5

Easing to a stop, the four-passenger elevator came to rest 3,000 meters below the surface of Three-Stones Academy. Its half-meter-thick stainless steel doors slid silently open into a long, well-lit corridor. Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor stepped through and walked along the carpeted hall to the guard station located at the far end. Beyond resided the sanctuary where Council Central and the Sacred Stones of the Nashramh were located. The elevator shaft was cut through solid granite and was the only entrance to this sanctuary which was forbidden to all but a few of the Nashramh's ruling elite: the Sisters-Magum.

As Rinim approached the end of the hall, a gleaming one-meter-thick stainless steel door to her right slid open, revealing the guard station where two grey-uniformed women sat behind a stone desk.

"Welcome, my Grace," one of the security women smiled. "The meeting is already in session, but you haven't missed anything requiring a vote. They've been discussing our expanding search of the outer rim battle zone and detailing current figures concerning G.C.C. casualties we've recovered so far. The review and summary of our own recovery operations are about to be announced."

"Thank you, Sister Ishaphah. I'm interested in this part of the recovery report. Have I scanned properly?"

"Yes, my Grace. Please enter."

Rinim walked past the two guards and entered another long carpeted hall, one with seven right-angle turns in it. This led to the Council Chamber. When she reached the end, a white metal door opened to her left side and she turned and entered a nearly darkened room. She walked directly to her special couch, sat down, and focused her attention on the proceedings.

There were several other people in the dimly lit room, all of whom were sitting quietly listening to one shadowy woman as she spoke.

Directly at the center of the circular room was a round pedestal on which a softly glowing triangular crystal vessel rested. This was the triangle with four sides, a tetrahedron, which served as a most singular repository for the three Sacred Stones of the Nashramh housed the complex structures of the ancient stones that comprised Ruby, Sapphire, and Onyx, along with millions of their sisters who'd been incarcerated in the black citadels of Borgdragon, Agbolter, and Agtren. Other than the ten couches and the pedestal, with its glowing vessel, there was nothing else in the carpeted room.

"Our gamma recovery operations out beyond the sixth-arm rim are beginning to show positive results," the young Magum's low-pitched voice toned calmly, "since we've developed our new system for locating the general coordinates of our disembodied Magums who were lost out in the void. This has added to the majority of our recent finds, and, as of this time, we've located the specific locations of 102,605 of our Magums and recovered 95,000 of them during the last four centuries. And, of these, 16,422 were recovered during the last 12 months. Only 1,406 haven't been located accurately as yet, but we are in contact with all of them. Along with each of our recovered Magums, we've retrieved all, I repeat, all of their sisters who died with them. It is only a matter of time now until we can recover those whose locations we've pinpointed, and discover the coordinates of the others."

Rinim knew about these figures, but was interested in the other data the young woman from the Necro-Classic Authority, Sister-Magum Panot Nu, was discussing. This portion of the long meeting took another hour and a half, which Rinim found to be rewarding.

Next, Sister-Magum Claren Demorah addressed the Council.

"I've come to discuss a problem that's been troubling us for a long time, and to dissuade this Council from making any further

mistakes in the matter. I refer, here, specifically to Kruminah B'Tziah. I understand she is being placed in an extended, and shrouded, field assignment that smells of revenge, harassment, and unwarranted punishment of a loyal sister."

"There will be no discussion of this matter until a later time, Claren," a voice from the crystal vessel spoke out. "We truly understand your concern, but Sahlie Lor, or Kruminah as you call her, has stepped beyond the bounds of good judgment and openly defied the orders of this Council. True, we are punishing her, but not for the reasons you suspect. We know her to be a loyal, although misguided sister who must be dealt with in a special manner. Please let this answer suffice until we are prepared to discuss the subject in greater detail, Claren."

"I take it, then, that the die is cast and I can do nothing to change your decision?" Claren pressed the matter.

"Not at this time, Claren. If it were only a matter of your sad occasions with her, it would be different. But we will consult with you later and listen to your good counsel. As you said, the die has already been cast."

"How long is this punishment to be imposed on Kruminah?" Rinim spoke out.

"We plan three or four gamma-regeneration cycles, Rinim. We're trying to get her undivided attention, and to correct some of her intrinsic personality disorders. We know her well from our experience together at Borgdragon, and we love her more than you or Claren can truly understand. This is why we, not Claren or all of those who were involved with her past persecution, have taken this drastic action. We feel we know what we are doing, unjust as it may seem, and we're attempting to set right some very old problems."

"I see," Rinim nodded. "Then, I will remain silent and await your disclosures at a later time."

"Thank you, Rinim."

Each of the Sisters-Magum present in the room gave her own special report to the Council until the meeting was about to conclude. Then a voice from the crystal vessel addressed Rinim.

"Sister Rinim, would you please share some information about your current projects with us, possibly some of the special ones that concern your protégés?"

Rinim smiled and launched into some of her favorite projects and long-range activities, most of which dealt with human beings who showed real potential for growth and service to the Nashramh. After outlining a dozen larger and very complex projects, she concluded by mentioning a few of her favorite people.

"As you can see, our newer sisters and potential binary-consorts, are an absolute success. My favorite little elf, our Sister Jennanine B'Mesziah, whom I mentioned earlier, has been asleep for several centuries on her home world of Mesziah, and will remain so for a few more. Then we'll introduce her into a new Low Elf body, from the Enchanted Forest, and bring her back into active service. Our little friend, the winged faerie Neff, is attending to her sleeping soul and ensuring the peacefulness of her rest."

Rinim paused for a few moments to think, then resumed. "Her son, Telakin B'Mesziah, has been united in a true binary-marriage with a former G.C.C. Pathfinder who is now Sister-Novice Dove Konissah. He's also in a binary-extended arrangement with our Sister-Captain Neferah B'Tziah. Telakin is presently on a long-term assignment with the Ansharim on the outer seventh-arm rim as an anthropological observer. He will serve in this capacity for one more life-cycle before returning to us and being united into a true binary-marriage with our Sister Neferah. Our most Reverend-Sister-Mirisca Rinim B'Mesziah-ha-Tolohn is currently serving with the Ansharim as a Necro-Classic field operative and is establishing special authority core-groups on the seventh-arm rimworlds, as is her maternal sister, through Jennanine B'Mesziah, Sister Myrnah B'Mesziah-ha-Hofbrenoh. Sister Myrnah has united in a true binary-marriage with an Ansharim agent, Brother Ben-Calo, with whom she has worked together for three life-cycles. We've located young Neftalak B'Mesziah, whom we will reintroduce back into an elfin body and assign to the G.C.C. Navy. He's made a few small mistakes during his first off-world life-cycle which we want him to work out before advancing him another step. Then, our Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah has reentered a new body, as a woman this time, and is working with the Ansharim on their colonization project. I might note that she liked being a man during her last life-cycle and doesn't see any problem with the experience. I think she was overly cautious about letting Raphael have his time in the sun, but now has different ideas on the matter."

Stars filled the morning sky as Rinim walked along the dark path leading from Council Central's headquarters. The general tone of the meeting was positive, at least with respect to the Sisterhood's gamma-recovery program. Otherwise, it was still the same terrible grind as millions of her sisters, along with the Ansharim's brothers, were being fed into the new battle being fought along the outer rim of the galaxy's sixth and seventh spiral arms. There was no end in sight and Adam Belial's Legions of Light were making greater inroads on a broader front now that they'd changed their battle strategy. Their capture of Meseosargon and the subsequent information extracted from him only proved much of which was already suspected by Nashramh analysts. Many of their carefully guarded secrets were already known to the enemy and were now only secret in their mechanics.

Rinim stopped and looked up at the unblinking stars that stood silently overhead. "Oh, my Eternal Creator, I so fear for those dear children who struggle out in the void to protect your beautiful Starset from the wanton pretender: Samael."

Peace,

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to read 'Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor
Archivist

Nashramh Class I Scout Destroyer
600 meters long

